

THE WORLD'S **NUMBER ONE** PC GAMES MAGAZINE

PC GAMER[®]

EVE

ONLINE

OUR WEIRD
NAKED WEEKEND
WITH CCP
GAMES

HUGE HANDS-ON

FLIGHT SIMULATOR

FLY ANYWHERE YOU CAN
IMAGINE IN THE
REVOLUTIONARY SEQUEL



EXCLUSIVE

GTA ONLINE

REVEALING
ROCKSTAR
INTERVIEW

FUTURE

ISSUE 337



HARDWARE

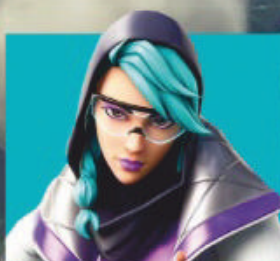
BUYER'S GUIDE

***BUILD YOUR
PERFECT PC***



SHENMUE 3

HANDS-ON WITH A
CLASSIC REBORN
— CAN IT POSSIBLY
LIVE UP TO THE HYPE?



FORTNITE

EXPERTS REVEAL
THE PSYCHOLOGY
BEHIND EPIC'S
UNSTOPPABLE HIT



FROM
£2999

Infinity Xtreme Titanium

Windows 10 Home

Intel® Core™ i9-9820X Processor

NVIDIA GeForce MSI RTX 2080Ti 11GB Video Card
ASUS TUF X299 MK 2 Mainboard
4x8GB 3200mhz HYPERX FURY Memory
500GB Samsung 970 EVO Plus SSD
2TB Seagate SATA-III HDD
CoolerMaster H500 RGB Gaming Case
Corsair CX750 750W Power Supply
Corsair H100i RGB Platinum Cooler w/ 2x MF120R Fans
TP-Link Archer T6E Dual Band Wireless Card



HD 7.1



Optional



Optional



FROM
£1769

Infinity X99 Ti

Windows 10 Home

Intel® Core™ i9-9900K Processor

NVIDIA GeForce MSI RTX 2070 SUPER 8GB Video Card
MSI Z390-A PRO Mainboard
16GB DDR4 2400mhz Corsair Vengeance LPX Memory
500GB Samsung 860 EVO SSD
2TB Seagate SATA-III HDD
CoolerMaster Masterbox MB530P Gaming Case
Corsair CX750 750W Power Supply
Cooler Master Master Liquid Lite 120 Cooling System
PRO Overclocking



HD 7.1



Optional



Optional



FROM
£799

Infinity X66

Windows 10 Home

Intel® Core™ i5-9400F Processor

NVIDIA GeForce MSI GTX 1660 6GB Video Card
MSI Z390-A PRO Mainboard
8GB DDR4 2400mhz Corsair Vengeance LPX Memory
2TB Seagate SATA-III HDD
InWin 101 Mid Tower Gaming Case
Cooler Master 400W Power Supply
Cooler Master Master Liquid Lite 120 Cooling System



HD 7.1



Optional



Optional



FROM
£1399

Infinity X99 GT

Windows 10 Home

Intel® Core™ i7-9700K Processor

NVIDIA GeForce MSI RTX 2060 SUPER 8GB Video Card
ASUS PRIME Z390-P Mainboard
16GB DDR4 2400mhz Corsair Vengeance LPX Memory
240GB Kingston A400 SSD
2TB Seagate SATA-III HDD
Thermaltake Versa J24 Gaming Case
Cooler Master 600W Power Supply
Cooler Master Master Liquid Lite 120 Cooling System
PRO Overclocking



HD 7.1



Optional



Optional

FROM
£559

Infinity X44

Windows 10 Home

Intel® Core™ i3-9100F Processor

NVIDIA GeForce MSI GTX 1650 4GB Video Card
Asus Prime H310M-K Mainboard
8GB DDR4 2400mhz Corsair Vengeance LPX Memory
1TB Seagate SATA-III HDD
CoolerMaster Masterbox MB520 Gaming Case
CoolerMaster 400W power supply
Intel Standard Cooler



HD 7.1



Optional



Optional



FROM
£1199

Tracer III 17 Turbo 300

Windows 10 Home

Intel® Core™ i7-9750H Processor

Intel HM370 Chipset
NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1660Ti 6GB Video card
8GB 2666MHz DDR4 Corsair Vengeance Memory
512GB Intel 660p NVMe SSD
17.3" FHD 144Hz IPS Display
Intel Gigabit Wireless-AC 9560 Wi-Fi + Bluetooth



5.5 hrs



Bluetooth 5



2x USB 3.1
1x USB 2.0

1x USB type C Built-in 720P HD Webcam 2.5 kg AC WIFI 1x HDMI 2x Mini Displayport

ORDER TODAY! **03333 237 776**

Work easy. Play hard.  Windows

Get £20 off using code PCGAME20 at the checkout



CUSTOM BUILD **GAMING PCs**

WWW.CYBERPOWERSYSTEM.CO.UK

Follow Us!    @CYBERPOWERUK |  @CYBERPOWER_UK

All Desktop systems come with 3 year Limited Warranty + lifetime toll free tech support
730 Baldwin Park Blvd, City of Industry, CA 91746. CyberPowerPC, CyberPowerPC Logo and, Unleash The Power are trademarks of CyberPower Inc. Copyright © 2018 CyberPower. All rights reserved. All prices are subject to change without notice or obligation. Celeron, Celeron Inside, Centrino Inside, Centrino Logo, Core Inside, Intel, Intel Logo, Intel Core, Intel Inside, Intel Inside Logo, Intel Viiiv, Intel vPro, Itanium, Itanium Inside, Pentium, Pentium Inside, Viiiv Inside, vPro Inside, Xeon, and Xeon Inside are trademarks of Intel Corporation in the U.S. and other countries. All prices are subject to change without notice or obligation. CyberPower is not responsible for any typographical or photographic errors. CyberPower is not responsible for any typographical or photographic errors.

Intel Inside®.
Extraordinary
Performance
Outside.





ELITE AUDIO— UNCONTESTED

Raise your play with the headset
engineered for high-resolution gaming.



LIGHTWEIGHT EXOSKELETON

TUNED ACOUSTIC CHAMBERS

50 MM DRIVERS

INLINE VOLUME CONTROL

[plantronics.com](https://www.plantronics.com)

PC

XBOX ONE®

PS4®

COMPATIBLE

Dolby Atmos® requires an Xbox One or Windows 10 compatible device, and a Microsoft account and login. Activation for one device only.
©2018 Plantronics, Inc. Dolby Atmos and the double-D symbol are trademarks of Dolby Laboratories. All trade names and trademarks
are the property of their respective owners. 7.18 195019

Available at
GAME

PC GAMER

#337 DECEMBER 2019

Future Publishing Ltd

Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA11UA

Tel 01225 442244 | Email letters@pcgamer.comwww.pcgamer.comfacebook.com
/pcgamer magazineyoutube.com
/pcgamertwitter.com
/pcgamertwitch.tv
/pcgamer

club.pcgamer.com

pcgaming
show.com

All contents © 2019 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/ services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: November 14

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.



We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. The manufacturing paper mill and printer hold full FSC and PEFC certification and accreditation.



Member of the
Audit Bureau of
Circulations
12,708
January-
December 2018

For press freedom
with responsibility

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)

www.futureplc.com

Chief executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

“THIS LATEST ENTRY COULD NOT BE A MORE PERFECT REINVENTION”



Despite its love of geeky detail, of procedure, of exacting realism, there's always been something very primal about *Microsoft Flight Simulator*. What players crave, what drives them to learn every step of a perfectly-recreated flight sequence, is *freedom* – that feeling of escape that only a journey into the sky can convey.

ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
Blue sky thinking

Twitter
@robinlvalentine

This month

Put a plane on the cover of an international games magazine and no one stopped him.

In that sense, this latest entry could not be a more perfect reinvention. Using technology sufficiently advanced to seem like magic, it realises a child-like vision of what a game should be: it lets you fly *literally anywhere* on the *entire Earth*. We're absolutely blown away by it, and we think you will be too.

ROBIN VALENTINE
MANAGING EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

TALK TO
PC GAMER
Have your say!
Email us at letters@pcgamer.com

The PC Gamer team



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
The zen of simulation

Twitter
@ultrabrilliant

This month
Actually flew a plane. Like, for real, they let this guy into a cockpit. This is genuinely not a bit.



STEVEN MESSNER
Specialist in
Hot tub interviews

Twitter
@stevenmessner

This month
Discussed chaos, wormholes, and space politics without a lot of clothes on.



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in
Rootin', tootin', shootin', and lootin'

Twitter
@my_beards

This month
Played 100 hours of *Borderlands 3* so you don't have to.



HARRY SHEPHERD
Specialist in
Telling other people what to do (in games)

Twitter
@HarryShepherd

This month
Started bringing his online guides expertise to the ancient world of print.

Contents

#337
DECEMBER 2019

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC GAMER
Check out our
special offer!
SEE p42



Monitor

08 THE TOP STORY

A *Hearthstone* pro overestimates his multi-tasking skills...

10 THE SPY

A sneaky look at *Splinter Cell*.

12 SPECIAL REPORT

What psychological impact does *Fortnite* have on kids?

14 CHARACTERSHEET

The secrets of *Borderlands*' Lilith.

Previews

18 Beyond a Steel Sky

22 Shenmue 3

24 Röki

26 Young Souls

28 Journey to the Savage Planet

30 Gamedec

32 Desperados III

Features

36 Microsoft Flight Simulator

After four hours with the plane game, we couldn't be more impressed.

44 EVE Fanfest

We get in a hot tub with *EVE*'s creators as they declare a new era of chaos.

50 GTA Online

Rockstar spills the beans on its multiplayer juggernaut.

36



18

BEYOND A STEEL SKY

Old meets new in this surprisingly expansive modern sequel to the classic adventure game.

36

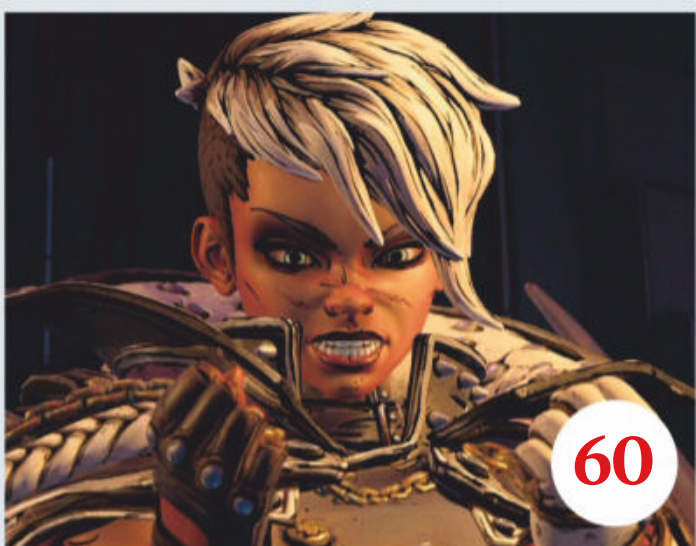
MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

The sky's the limit.

44

EVE FANFEST

CCP Games brings its annual convention to... some random person's house? We head out to Finland for a weekend of booze, saunas, and wormhole theory.



50 GTA ONLINE

Six years on from its original launch, we chat to the team at Rockstar about the past, present, and future of a true multiplayer phenomenon.

60 BORDERLANDS 3

The iconic looter-shooter returns amid a swirling storm of controversy. Does it rise above, or wallow in poo jokes and just-slightly-too-old references?

92 MOTHERBOARDS RATED

The right motherboard can be the lynchpin of your build – but which is the best one for you?

Reviews

- 60 Borderlands 3
- 64 Blair Witch
- 66 Untitled Goose Game
- 68 Gears 5
- 70 The Surge 2
- 74 Crying Suns
- 76 Blasphemous
- 78 eFootball PES 2020
- 80 FIFA 20
- 82 Greedfall
- 84 Ni No Kuni Remastered

FREE GAMES

- 86 Discomfort
- 87 Mr Flipper
- 87 Goreball

THEY'RE BACK

- 88 No Man's Sky
- 89 Heat Signature
- 89 To The Moon
- 89 FTL
- 89 Endless Space 2

Hardware

- 92 **GROUP TEST**
The best motherboards around.
- 96 **TECHREPORT**
The power of nanotubes.
- 98 **BUYER'S GUIDE**
Build your perfect PC.

Extra Life

- 102 **NOW PLAYING**
How James Bond influenced *Control*.
- 106 **REINSTALL**
Does *Final Fantasy XIII* hold up?
- 110 **UPDATE**
Hitman 2's new bank heist explored.
- 112 **HOW TO**
Our guide to building a raid group.
- 114 **REPORT**
Civ VI's odd new battle royale mode.
- 118 **MOD SPOTLIGHT**
Be a farmer or a slime in *Slay the Spire*.
- 122 **DIARY**
The final part of *Hitman* Lotto.
- 126 **WHY I LOVE**
An ode to grinding.
- 128 **MUST PLAY**
James bares his gaming soul.

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



CHECKMATE

HEARTHSTONE pro caught playing *Auto Chess* during a Grandmasters battle

In a little less than a year, the *Dota Auto Chess* mod's popularity has already spawned plenty of imitators, as well as a standalone follow-up from the original developers. Now they're even making surprise cameos in other games' tournaments.

Hearthstone pro Linh 'Seiko' Nguyen was playing a Grandmasters match against Elias 'Bozzzton' Sibelius in September and, during the course of the battle, made some catastrophic errors that ultimately cost him the match, surprising the viewers watching and his opponent.

Viewers could see that Nguyen was distracted, and he wasn't watching the screen. Instead he kept looking down at his lap. He was so busy doing something else that he was the last person to realise he'd lost. And it turns out that 'something else' was playing *Auto Chess*.

"THE EXPECTATION IS THAT PLAYERS SHOULD BE ENTIRELY PRESENT"

It was obvious he was paying more attention to whatever was on his lap, and he came clean about what he found so engrossing in a confession on Twitter. At the same time as he was competing in *Hearthstone*, Nguyen was playing in an *Auto Chess* tournament qualifier. Trying to play in two tournaments simultaneously might have been a bold move, but his lack of professionalism also drew a lot of criticism. *Hearthstone* Grandmasters is meant to represent the very best of *Hearthstone*, so there's an expectation that competitors will be committed – or at least not playing an entirely different game during a live match.

LIBRARY'S FINE

NEW STEAM LIBRARY



Valve has beta-launched Steam's new library, and it's about time. The software has felt frozen in time for years now, and it's nice to see my game collection presented in a more intuitive, handsome way. I also like the little sparkly glow you get around any rare achievements you've unlocked. ■ **AK**

STAR TURN

ROCKSTAR LAUNCHER



As part of the ongoing mission to ensure there's a bespoke launcher for every company on the planet, Rockstar has entered the fray. The new Rockstar Games Launcher comes replete with cloud saves, automatic updates, and a shop that matches Steam prices – but why? ■ **TC**

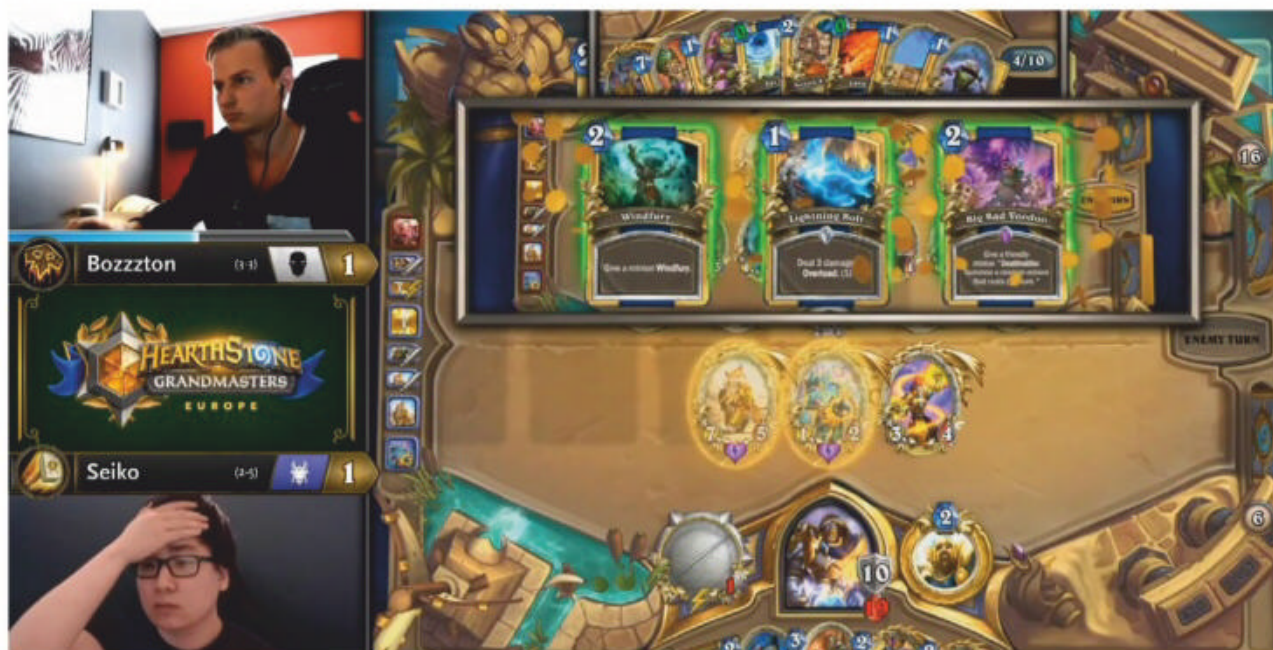


BROOKER PRIZE

BANDERSNATCH



Black Mirror's interactive entry has won an Emmy, and it doesn't sit right with me. It feels like Bandersnatch is applauded as revolutionary for disguising a pretty basic adventure game as a TV episode – ignoring the work of devs who've been doing great work in the genre for years. ■ **RV**



LEFT: Hearthstone is on the simple, accessible side of CCGs – but it's not that simple.

ABOVE: Nguyen was the last to realise that he'd made a huge mistake.

Nguyen did make an apology, but it was mostly for not being good enough to win both matches. "I really thought I had enough practice, that I could handle playing both games without paying too much attention to *Auto Chess*," he wrote on Twitter. "Unfortunately it took too much attention though, which didn't end up well in *HS*. I got really punished for this and regret that I couldn't evaluate the situation correctly."

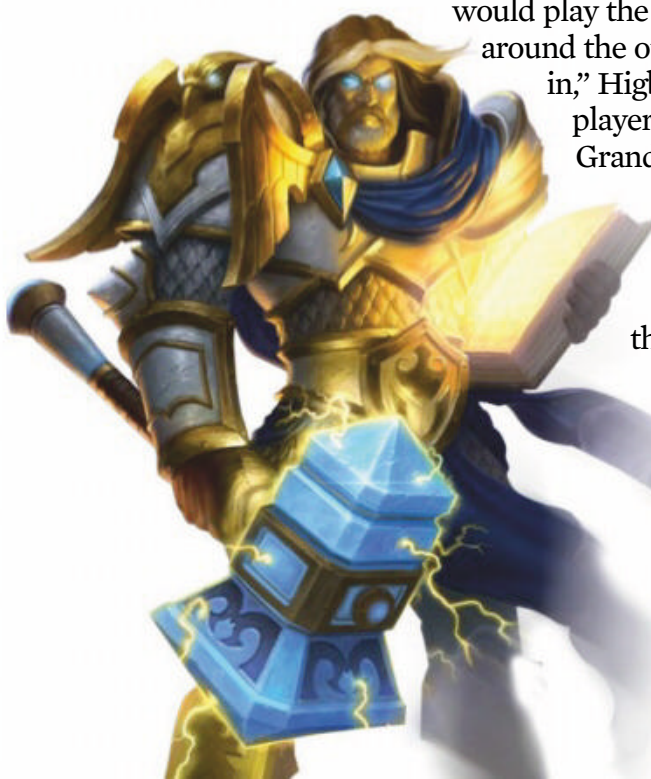
LESSON LEARNED?

Nguyen actually informed Blizzard that he was competing in the *Auto Chess* qualifier, but not that he was going to be playing in both matches simultaneously. Blizzard's Drew Higbee clarified that it wasn't acceptable but was also the result of a miscommunication.

"We didn't intend for him to play directly over a Grandmaster event, and mistakenly understood that Seiko would play the *Hearthstone* matches and work this around the other tournament he was participating in," Higbee said. "The expectation is that players should be entirely present for their Grandmasters Matches. That being said, we acknowledge and apologise that our response to Seiko obviously engendered confusion and our communication will be more clear in the future."

Nguyen ultimately chose to drop out of the *Auto Chess* qualifier, giving up on his shot at the \$1,000,000 prize. Like an esports Icarus, it seems he flew too close to the sun.

Fraser Brown, Luke Winkie



Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Netflix's *The Witcher*

According to a now deleted social media post from Netflix, Geralt will be hitting screens on December 17.

Sea of Thieves

The pirate romp has pets now! They dance, they vomit and you can fire them out of a cannon.

EVE Online

The MMO will implement grief counselling for new players who lose a ship.

Cyberpunk 2077

Romance options are confirmed, but we're told you can't get dirty with Keanu, so what's the point?

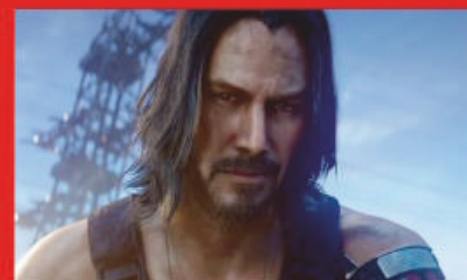
EA

The publisher's amazing defence of loot boxes is now in the Guinness Book of Records for most downvoted comment on Reddit.

Fallout 76

A new update adds a useful fridge item... but it costs real money, breaking Bethesda's promises of no pay-to-win microtransactions.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?



THE SPY

The Spy has replaced each of The Spy's body parts, but is still definitely The Spy.

The thing films don't teach you about espionage is that it's 99% waiting. You wait for the dead drop. You wait for the perfect shot. You wait for the evil genius to cease monologuing about world domination long enough for you to tell him that you've already redirected the death laser into the swarm of homing sharks and his plans are now naught but a pathetic rerun of a Shelley poem.

Life doesn't happen in montage. It all takes time – time that The Spy likes to spend considering the great mysteries of the universe. For instance: why are wasps? For what reason did nature create an angrier, shitter version of bees? Was it just the evolutionary version of banter? And, if so, is the joke on wasps, bees or us?

Other times The Spy likes to ponder some of philosophy's enduring thought experiments, such as: if Tom Clancy is no longer alive to put his name on a *Tom Clancy* game, in what way is it meaningfully a Tom Clancy joint? Is that possessive apostrophe a lie? And, if so, is the deception for us, Ubisoft or wasps?

Despite metaphysical implications that have been debated since Plato's time, Ubisoft will not be dissuaded from the practice. Already this month the publisher has released *Tom's Clancy's Ghost's*

Recon's Breakpoint, and now a bizarre product listing suggests more *Tom Clancy* games could be on the way.

A game: try saying 'Clancy' over and over again for about half a minute and then re-read that last paragraph and see if it feels like your brain is trying to escape your skull. This is also a good way to pass some time.

Retailer Gamespot is selling *Splinter Cell*-themed toy goggles of the kind no fashion conscious The Spy would be caught dead in. That in itself isn't notable – people love a bit of gaming tat, and, as untrendy as they are, *Splinter Cell*'s three-lensed goggles are certainly recognisable.

The interesting bit is the description. "For the first time since the introduction of *Splinter Cell* in 2002, after nine top selling AAA+ titles, and with the 10th release on the horizon, this is your first chance to own Sam Fisher's signature Ultra High-Frequency Sonar Goggles," it readily enthuses.

Hold on a second there Gamespot's website's *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*'s Sam Fisher's goggles' description. "10th release"? "On the horizon"? Is this an unintentional announcement of a new *Splinter Cell*? And, if so... well, you get the idea.

SPLINTER-SMELL

If there's a reason to think it isn't, it's because the numbers, Mason, they don't add up. There have not been nine main *Splinter Cell* games.

There have been seven, and only then if you count *Splinter Cell: Essentials*. The Spy doesn't. Not because it was a PSP exclusive, but because the name makes it sound like a range of toiletries designed to be concealed in a form-fitting fiberglass stealth suit.

This alone makes the listing sound less like an accidental reveal, and more like a bored copywriter who didn't bother to do any research. Or, is it actually a coded message designed to activate a sleeper agent? And, if so, is that agent a Ubisoft employee, a Gamespot employee or wasps? We'll just have to wait and see. Spy out. ■
The Spy

FOR WHAT REASON DID NATURE CREATE AN ANGRIER, SHITTER VERSION OF BEES?

This month in... 2009



1 It's the *Dragon Age* that we don't get shouted at for giving 94% and naming the RPG of the decade on the cover. Which is fair, as *Dragon Age: Origins* is a brilliant game and well deserves its plaudits and legacy. And don't worry. We'll get to *that* sequel in about a year and a half.

ISSUE
207, December 2009
ON THE COVER
Dragon Age: Origins
IN CINEMAS
Zombieland

2 *Dragon Age*, *Borderlands*, and *Need for Speed Shift* were in this issue's reviews. It was around this time when people finally stopped pretending PC gaming was dead.



3 We'd never claim that magazine coverlines are sometimes sensationalist, but let's just say that "Windows 7 on trial – why you still don't need it" is a... spicy interpretation of Alec Meer's enthusiastic report on Microsoft's OS. After years on XP and the tragedy that was Vista, we may not have needed it, but we definitely wanted it.

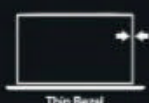


THE GAME JUST
GOT REAL



GE65 Raider

BOUNDLESS VISION, FEARLESS POWER



Cooler Boost 5

240Hz

Up to Intel® Core™ i9 processor | Windows 10 Home / Windows 10 Pro | Up to NVIDIA® GeForce RTX™ 2080

WHERE TO BUY

laptopsdirect >
The UK's Largest Laptop Specialists



OVERCLOCKERS UK

SCAN S

uk.msi.com

Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Ratings boards mostly just evaluate *Fortnite's* depictions of violence.

FORTNITE EFFECT

It's all kids want to play. But what's **FORTNITE** doing to them?

For kids, *Fortnite* is still the game of the moment. Not that this comes as any surprise, since it has everything going for it. It's free it's immediate, tension-filled, complex, rewarding, and every season adds events and new features to explore. It's a good game!

And like every game kids love, many parents are terrified by it. A visit to the UK parenting forum Mumsnet immediately surfaces threads such as, "Does *Fortnite* turn your kid into an arsehole too?" and "F*#@ing *Fortnite*... ruining our lives". They describe their kids "turning into monsters" while playing, and achieving lower grades. As a parent to one tween and an early teen, I can't help but understand their concerns. I'm not quite so angry or fearful, but I've found *Fortnite* has introduced new tension into my household, and it's made me realise that my attitude to my kids playing games like it is a lot less laissez-faire than I ever thought it would be.

It's useful, however, to remember that today's games are very different to the ones we probably grew up with. They're no longer tied to the living room TV or office computer, which naturally limited the time we could spend playing. *Fortnite* can be played anywhere there's an internet connection, and it's also endless, designed to hold its players in indefinite reward loops, and does everything

it can to sell Battle Passes, costumes, and whatever else. And, being multiplayer, it potentially exposes kids to the worst of online behaviour.

I wonder what all this is doing to kids. The truth, however, is that psychologists don't really know. "I have not seen any research looking at the effects of playing those kinds of games," says research psychologist Dr Rachel Kowert, who is research director of Take This, a charity that promotes mental health for gamers and the industry. She's come across research around the design of loot boxes, which has generally found that they have the same psychological effects as gambling. "And there's research about instant gratification, and games really play on, 'Oh, you could have that if you just buy this one thing'. But I haven't seen any research on whether it has some kind of psychological effect on players themselves."

After all, loot boxes are only one reflection of the power modern games have over your kids' time and attention. For Kourosh Dini, a psychiatrist and author of *Video Game Play and Addiction: A Guide for Parents*, games are among many other digital services that hammer notifications to their users. *Fortnite's* notifications for invites and friend requests are also reminders that their friends are playing without them, keeping the game close, even when it's not running. It's this aspect of *Fortnite* which has provided many flashpoints in my household.



Age Rating

What age should a child start playing a game like *Fortnite*? Industry ratings boards PEGI and ESRB deem 12 and 13, respectively, mostly for its depictions of violence. But parents should also consider their kids' abilities to understand when a game is selling to them, when compulsion to play is taking over from pleasure, and when to walk away from uncomfortable social situations.



FAR LEFT: *Fortnite* is all-pervasive, sharing progression on PC, console and mobile versions.

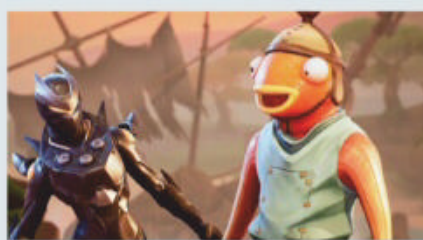
LEFT: F2P games must sell products in-game, but how do children deal with the temptation?

MED KIT Games are often a point of self-medication for children, as psychiatrist Kourosh Dini explains



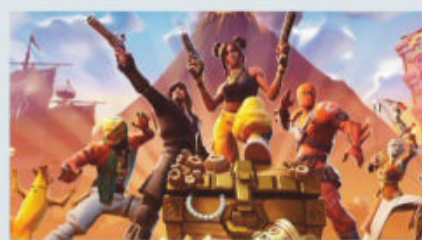
SOCIALISING

Kids who have issues with socialising can often find friends online that they can't in person.



IDENTITY

Games can be a place where kids can express themselves in the way they choose and explore who they want to be.



MASTERY

Everyone needs to feel like they're good at something, and games offer ways to feel skilful and that they're respected.



CONTROL

For kids who grow up in unstable households, the consistent rules of games can feel like a refuge.

"There are so many things that are asking for our attention, and that goes with a cost structure where the first bit is free and if you want something better you've got to pay for it," says Dini. "Between attention and our sense of agency, we have to monitor our ability to choose things without pressure."

CHILD'S PLAY

But there's little research into all this, because a great deal of studies around games are focused on the effects of videogame violence, which has been the banner 'Problem With Videogames' for time immemorial.

"There's tonnes of work on videogames and violence, and there's a non-existent link," says Kowert. That's good news. But because belief persists that there is a link, more money is available to put into projects that study links between games and violence, even if most of them aim to debunk them. "Maybe if we can get some funding for something besides violence, we might find other real problems with games! But violence is where the money is because it's where the fear-mongering is."

But parent forums aren't making up the woes they describe, and there are problems around games, even if they're unstudied. As a psychiatrist, Dini sees kids brought in by parents and he can tell they're playing too much.

"They're not connecting with others, they're not going out, not interacting at dinnertime. Maybe they're having a hard time at school and their grades are dropping because

they're not doing the work. And then there's a secondary problem, when a parent takes the game away from them and they're met with screams."

But the problem isn't, Dini believes, games themselves, but with other issues in their lives. "Every single time I've interviewed a kid, a teenager, or even someone in their 20s, who is stuck playing games and can't seem to find a way to sustain themselves and lead a meaningful and fulfilling life, the trouble almost every single time is something besides games."

"It's not games that are the problem," agrees Kowert. "Games have been identified as providing emotional

self-medication. They're a vehicle that different underlying problems are being funnelled through."

She says that only 0.2% of individuals use games in a way that's 'maladaptive' (though it's worth noting that studies of various

vintages claim a range of numbers, with one suggesting 8% of gamers exhibit "pathological patterns of play"). And the focus on negative aspects of games means their positive aspects are under-considered, such as their social nature. "I really love *Fortnite*, and I cannot imagine my ability to multitask the way these children do when they play *Fortnite*," Kowert continues.

Games are more complex and rewarding than ever, a power that comes with consequences. That means that while there's lots for parents to worry about, a better way is to help encourage a balanced attitude to games. ■

Alex Wiltshire

"GAMES HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SELF-MEDICATION"

Character Sheet

[[GAMING'S HEROES & VILLAINS EXPLORED

Lilith has transformed from a relatively quiet player avatar into a key lead of the series' narrative.

SIREN SONG

LILITH, the heart and soul of *Borderlands*

It's not easy being one of the six most powerful women in the galaxy. As an eridium-fueled Siren in the *Borderlands* games, Lilith wields deadly abilities – but bears a heavy burden. Recent games have placed her front-and-centre as a straight-talking leader, but she didn't begin life that way. We spoke with *Borderlands 3*'s co-lead writer Sam Winkler about how she's changed – and what she means to the popular series.

In the original *Borderlands*, Lilith was one of the four playable vault hunters and didn't have much approaching a personality. When it came time to take the original cast and turn them into story characters, that meant retrofitting each with a sense of self. "All of the *Borderlands* player characters have distinct voices and personalities," Winkler says. "But there always needs to be some wiggle room for the players themselves to fit in. When you transition them to NPC status, you have to backfill those gaps in ways that are both rewarding and not jarring to the people who played as them. You have to find the throughlines."

For Lilith, that throughline is her confidence and attitude. She doesn't do anything cautiously or at half measure. She fights hard, parties harder, and runs headlong into danger throughout the series. "One of the cool things about writing for *Borderlands* is that the heroes aren't always right and they don't always make the best decisions," Winkler says. "Lilith has royally screwed up several times in the franchise, and those moments have shaped who she is in *Borderlands 3*."

This is the same woman who decided, in the heat of battle, to juice herself up with eridium and use her Siren 'phaseshift' ability to move the entire town of Sanctuary along with her in *Borderlands 2*. And that's exactly the sort of reckless last resort that defines her character.

"Lilith is one of the most powerful and dangerous people in the universe," Winkler says. "And she knows it." That confidence was a natural part of playing *Borderlands* as Lilith and became the cornerstone of her personality as an NPC in the games that followed.

What don't we know about Lilith that we may never see in a game? Winkler is hesitant to give away anything in his hand that may still be of use, but he does reveal one detail that helps inform her story in the new sequel, "One line that ended up getting cut from the *Commander Lilith and the Fight for Sanctuary* DLC was a confirmation that she was born with her tattoos, while some other Sirens, like Angel, were not. *Borderlands 3* blows up some pre-conceptions of Siren powers and how they find their way to people."

IT TAKES TWO

Another important throughline for Lilith is her relationship with Roland, known in *Borderlands* as 'the Soldier'. The two both began as playable characters in *Borderlands*. By the time of *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, we meet the two vacationing together in Moxxi's bar, a getaway plan that I suspected wasn't Roland's first choice. "Roland wasn't exactly the most unbuttoned guy on Pandora, so it's hard to imagine a vacation being his idea," Winkler confirms. "But if one of the six legendary Sirens asks you to come dancing with her, you go."

Throughout *Borderlands 2* and the *Pre-Sequel*, Roland takes on the role of the 'man with a plan' while Lilith bulls forward on the path he sets for the vault hunters. After being separated at the beginning of *Borderlands 2*, Lilith takes

up the alias 'Firehawk' as the leader of a group of psychos. Despite that tenure as bandit legend prior to meeting back up with Roland and the crew, Winkler says, "Lilith never intended to become the leader of anything."

Now, (*Borderlands 2* spoilers) after Roland has been killed by Handsome Jack, Lilith is left to pick up the pieces of the Crimson Raiders that he once led.

In the wake of his death, someone has to step up and take charge, a role that Lilith initially struggles with. Years later in *Borderlands 3*, Winkler says, "She's a confident, driven commander who is laser-focused on finding the map to the Vaults."

Lilith ultimately fills Roland's shoes as a commander, but I had to wonder: will anyone else take his place as her partner?

"Lilith is a deeply private person. She struggles with letting down her guard and showing weakness," Winkler says. "How the hell do you meet new people in the *Borderlands*? I wouldn't use a Hyperion dating app, for sure." Sounds like if there's another person in Lilith's life it will have to be another on-the-job introduction.

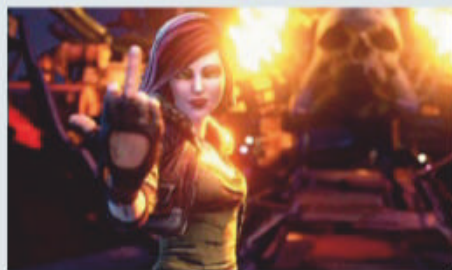
Despite Gearbox's fondness for a certain dubstepping toaster, Lilith has evolved into the perfect face for the series. Brash, powerful, yet oddly human – she's come a long way from just being the support class.

Lauren Morton

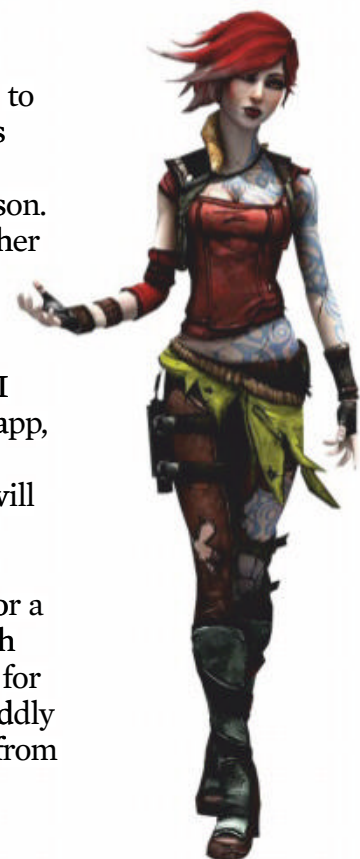
SHE FIGHTS HARD, PARTIES HARDER, AND RUNS HEADLONG INTO DANGER

"SUP?"

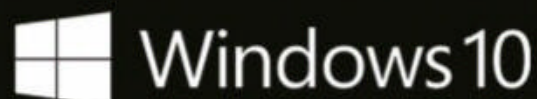
Lilith's defining, yet mono-syllabic catchphrase



I asked Winkler what Lilith's best one-liner is, half expecting to hear a quip that I'd forgotten and half expecting the exact answer I got. "Hard to beat the quintessential Lilith 'Sup?'," he says. "All praise to Colleen Clindenbeard for imbuing enough character into a single syllable that no one else gets to own it."



PC Specialist recommends Windows



PROTEUS VI RTX

15.6" Matte Full HD IPS Screen
Intel® Core™ i7-8750H
16GB Kingston DDR4 2133MHz
8GB GeForce RTX 2070
1TB SEAGATE 7mm SATA HDD (7,200)
Genuine Windows 10 Home

This spec from
£1,349.99



VORTEX ELITE

PCS 6003B BLACK GAMING CASE
Intel® Core™ i3-8100
ASUS® H310M-A
8GB Corsair VENGEANCE 2400MHz
2GB GEFORCE GTX 1050
Genuine Windows 10 Home

This spec from
£529.99



DEFIANCE V RTX

17.3" Matte Full HD 144Hz Screen
Intel® Core™ i7-8750H
16GB Corsair 2133MHz
8GB GeForce RTX 2070 Max-Q
1TB SEAGATE 7mm SATA HDD (7,200)
Genuine Windows 10 Home

This spec from
£1,449.99



ILLUSION ELITE

THERMALTAKE V200 RGB TG
AMD Ryzen 7 2700X
ASUS® TUF X470-PLUS GAMING
16GB Corsair VENGEANCE 2400MHz
16GB AMD RADEON™ VII
Genuine Windows 10 Home

This spec from
£1,689.99



GET A FURTHER £15 OFF WITH
THIS EXCLUSIVE VOUCHER CODE:

PCG19

0333 011 7000

Some features require Windows 10. Update available through Windows Store. Internet access required; fees may apply.
Microsoft, and Windows are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the United States and/or other countries.

* Prices are including VAT and are correct at the time of printing, but subject to change.



/PCSPECIALIST



@PCSPECIALIST



CUSTOM GAMING DESKTOPS & LAPTOPS

ORDER ONLINE NOW AT

WWW.PCSPECIALIST.CO.UK

PREVIEW



Beyond a Steel Sky

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC 2019DEVELOPER
Revolution SoftwarePUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
www.revolution.co.ukBEYOND A
STEEL SKYReturn to Union City in
Revolution's next adventure

Before we dive in, some history. Back in 1994, Revolution Software, the UK studio behind the *Broken Sword* series, released a point-and-click adventure called *Beneath a Steel Sky*. Set in a future Australia, it followed the adventures of Robert Foster, an outback wanderer who found himself stranded in the dystopian Union City. The game was notable for the involvement of Dave Gibbons, the artist behind Alan Moore's *Watchmen* comics, and it was a commercial and critical success.

Beneath a Steel Sky could have easily been forgotten, one of those adventure game curios that we occasionally dig out of the archives to fondly remember. But for years it's been one of the games people receive for free when they sign up for GOG.com, which has kept its heart beating. Not to mention a recent mobile port, which lets you play the thing on a modern smartphone.

Between this and the *Broken Sword* series' appearance on phones, Revolution has always been great at keeping its beloved old games alive.

Fast forward 25 years and *Beneath a Steel Sky* has developed something of a cult following. It's a deeply strange game, being a curious mix of bleak urban dystopia and Python-esque British humour. Despite the Australian setting, the people you meet are mostly English northerners – and the hero, Foster, has an American accent for some reason. But despite this dizzying tonal inconsistency, it's a very good adventure game. I especially liked the ability to implant your AI pal Joey's brain into various different robot bodies.

Union City flips familiar dystopian city tropes, with the wealthy and privileged living in the lower levels and the poor being confined to the upper levels, where an

endless sea of factories belches black smoke into the sky.

Rigid and unfair class systems were a big theme in *Beneath a Steel Sky*, and you can expect a continuation of that. In the first game Foster begins at the very top of Union City after a helicopter crash.

In the sequel, titled *Beyond a Steel Sky*, he starts his adventure at the front gate and has to find a way in.

SKY'S THE LIMIT

Beyond a Steel Sky is fully 3D, with a third-person viewpoint, and Revolution has developed a graphics technology designed to mimic the distinctive style of Gibbons, who is back on board again as art director. The only location revealed so far is the entrance to the city, but it's an impressive sight – a colossal gate with skyscrapers stretching endlessly into the stark, blue desert sky.

The light-hearted tone of the original game has been retained, too. This isn't some bleak, rain-sodden *Blade Runner* vision of the future. It's bright and colourful, with expressive characters rendered in a bold comic book style.

A benevolent AI, strongly hinted to be Joey from the first game, is running the city now, but this being an adventure game, finding your way in involves more than just dropping your old pal a WhatsApp. Revolution is still an adventure-game designer at heart, and *Beyond a Steel Sky* will be heavy on puzzles, conversations, and exploration.

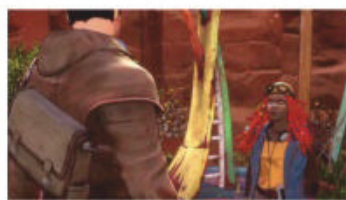
Dialogue is presented similar to *Mass Effect*, with a selection of options to choose from – a pretty standard affair with lines marked as to whether they'll progress the story or just provide background info and gags. But *Beyond* has a few fresh ideas up its sleeve too, including a new version of its Virtual Theatre system.

Sorry, more history. Revolution's first few games, including *Lure of the Temptress* and *Beneath a Steel Sky*, used a technology called Virtual Theatre that

FIRST
LOOKTHE LIGHT-HEARTED TONE
OF THE ORIGINAL GAME HAS
BEEN RETAINED TOO

PREVIEW

Beyond a Steel Sky



There are all sorts to connect with in *Beyond the Steel Sky*.

Registration

introduced some basic simulation elements to the traditional adventure game format. This meant that some characters would have routines, and would only appear in certain places at certain times. It was pretty basic stuff, but it made the world feel more alive.

In most adventure games characters just stand in one place waiting for you to talk to them, here they moved around, and Revolution is taking this concept a step further in *Beyond*.

SPANNER IN THE WORKS

The entrance to Union City is a large circular area teeming with life, including floating robots, citizens wandering around, and even some native Australian wildlife. Ahead is the city gate, behind us, the endless expanse of the Aussie outback. And this location is like a big clockwork mechanism running on a routine. Almost like a *Hitman* level. And to puzzle his way into the city, Foster has to break this routine.

I won't spoil any specifics, but the idea is that the world is a machine and you're the spanner being hurled into its gears, which involves some old-fashioned point-and-click object puzzling, and something altogether more interesting and innovative – LINC hacking.

If you didn't play the original *Beneath a Steel Sky*, LINC (that stands for Logical Inter-Neural Connection) is an all-powerful AI that connects and controls everything in Union City. Because as we know, entrusting the running of something like a city to an advanced, possibly sentient machine is always a good idea. And by far my favourite feature in *Beyond* is being able to use a handheld hacking device to dip into the code of various objects in the world and reprogram it using a neat drag-and-drop interface.

An example of this is when Foster doesn't have the correct credentials to access a computer system. Rather than hunt for the correct access chip, he hacks into the system and flips two visualised pieces of code around. So now when it detects the wrong credentials, instead of denying access, it grants it.

Other LINC hacking puzzles are more complex, including speeding up a

conveyor belt to fling a crate at a robot, immobilise it, and steal its battery. It's a similar kind of programming system to games like *Hack 'n' Slash* or *Heart Break()*, but with no coding required, just dragging blocks around.

This combined with the Virtual Theatre system makes for a wonderfully reactive game. Revolution also says that LINC hacking won't just be used for solving puzzles, but causing mischief too.

You'll be able to use it to mess with characters and otherwise screw up the simulation, which should result in some amusing moments. Again, like the original, *Beyond* has that slightly strange mix of grim dystopian fiction and goofball humour, which is, honestly, exactly what I wanted to see from a *Steel Sky* sequel. I just hope there are as many northern accents in this one, because very few dystopias feature as many Brummies and Geordies as *Beneath a Steel Sky* did.

FOSTERING FRIENDSHIPS

A sense of humour has always been at the heart of Revolution's games, and I'm glad to see it back in full force in *Beyond*, which could have easily leaned into the grimdark stuff that's so popular in cyberpunk-style games at the moment. The characters are also not what you would expect from a setting like this.

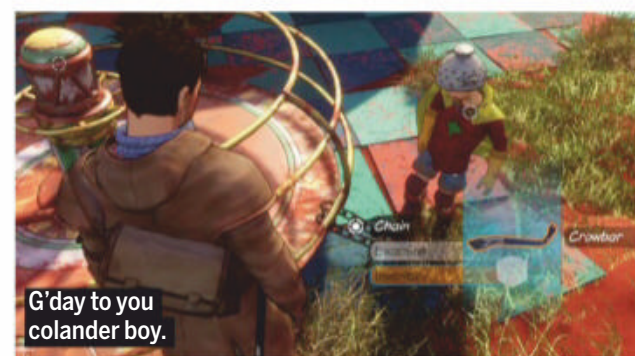
Among the people Foster meets are a hippy repairman, a beer-sucking trucker camped out on a deck chair, and a little kid from the outback who has information about the missing child Foster is entering Union City to find. They'll all play a part in fleshing out the story, which continues directly on from *Beneath a Steel Sky* – though the developer is staying tight-lipped for now as to exactly how.

I'm delighted to see Revolution making a new adventure game and venturing once again, after those few 3D *Broken Swords*, into the world of three dimensions. *Beyond a Steel Sky* is exciting because it's not just a standard point-and-click game, with that LINC hacking system and the Virtual Theatre simulation standing out as something new for the genre. Revolution is also keen to stress that you don't need to have played *Beneath a Steel Sky* to enjoy *Beyond*.

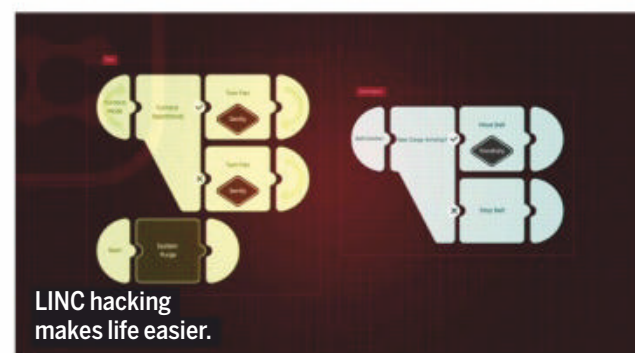
It's a new story that can stand alone, which seems a wise decision, because as good as the 1994 game was, that was a long time ago. *Beyond a Steel Sky* seems the perfect mix of old ideas and new innovations – I can't wait to see more.

Andy Kelly

REVOLUTION ALSO SAYS THAT LINC HACKING WON'T JUST BE USED FOR SOLVING PUZZLES



G'day to you colander boy.



LINC hacking makes life easier.



PREVIEW

Shenmue III



Ryo will have to learn new martial arts skills.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 19

DEVELOPER
Ys Net, Neilo

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

LINK
www.shenmue.link

SHENMUE III

The world's weirdest martial arts detective RPG is back

Across two games, Japanese teenager Ryo Hazuki chased his father's killer, Lan Di, across Japan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese countryside, and then... that was it. The Sega Dreamcast died, taking the *Shenmue* series with it. That is until, in one of history's greatest comebacks, Yu Suzuki convinced Kickstarter backers to fund *Shenmue III*.

I'm playing this most unlikely of sequels for the first time and I still can't believe it's real. Ryo is in a rural Chinese village called Bailu, where we left him at the end of *Shenmue II* almost 20 years ago, and it's like slipping into an old leather jacket. Suzuki and his studio Ys Net has done a remarkable job of retaining that distinctive *Shenmue* feel, in both the aesthetic and controls.

For me the power of *Shenmue* has always been its sense of place, and Bailu is a remarkably atmospheric setting. Nestled in the mountains, it's a sleepy, idyllic hamlet a far cry from the bustle of Hong Kong and Yokosuka. As I wander between the huts, I notice a stunning level of detail in the environments. Suzuki painstakingly researched rural Chinese life in the 1980s, and it shows in every quaint, cluttered house Ryo stumbles into.

I'm surprised by how good it looks. *Shenmue III* only has a fraction of the budget of the original, which was, at the time, the most expensive videogame ever made. But Ys Net has done an amazing job here, and I find myself just staring in awe at the mountains in the distance and

PLAYED
IT

fluffy clouds drifting through the blue sky. The traditional Chinese music helps establish the mood too, and the peaceful atmosphere is just pure *Shenmue*.

Ryo is looking for someone in Bailu – a man with a scar on his face. *Shenmue* is basically a detective game and that has been carried over to the sequel. I walk around Bailu chatting to the villagers, asking if they've seen the man. Some of them are reluctant to speak to me, which is a new system introduced in *Shenmue III*. You'll have to make a name for yourself in an area before folk will trust you. This reinforces the idea that Ryo is a long way from the suburbs of Japan, an outsider.

TRAIN TO WIN

But I manage to squeeze the information I need out of someone. The guy with the scar runs a local gambling stand and I confront him. He won't play ball and challenges me to a fight, revealing another important game system. He absolutely batters me, but helpfully tells me that there's a dojo nearby where I can increase my martial arts prowess. And so I spend some time with the training dummies, increasing my kung-fu stats until I'm tough enough to beat him.

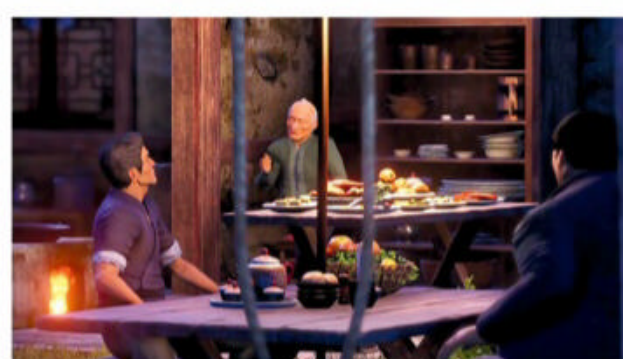
I also spend some time earning money. Whether it's shifting crates or driving forklifts, Ryo has never been shy of grafting, and I spend a while chopping wood for a local villager. It's a timing-based minigame, scoring you for accuracy, and it's weirdly hypnotic. And it's been confirmed that forklift driving will return as a job, probably in one of the bigger urban areas. Ryo's third adventure will take him to large, bustling towns when he eventually leaves Bailu.

It's encouraging to see that *Shenmue* is exactly what I wanted it to be – a lightweight martial arts RPG with detective elements. There have been some concessions to modern game design, particularly in Ryo's more responsive character movement. But apart from that, this is like playing a Dreamcast game, albeit one with wildly improved visuals. *Shenmue* has always been an idiosyncratic, divisive game, and this probably won't change people's minds. But as a fan of the series, it's everything I dreamed it would be.

Andy Kelly



IT'S BEEN CONFIRMED THAT FORKLIFT DRIVING WILL RETURN AS A JOB



Röki

The camera makes it seem as if something's lurking out of view.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Winter 2019

DEVELOPER
Polygon Treehouse

PUBLISHER
United Label

LINK
www.polygon-treehouse.com

RÖKI

In this adventure a child helps monsters instead of fighting them

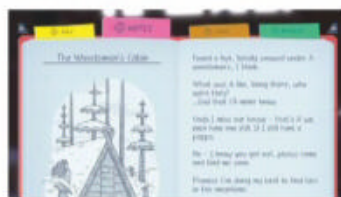
Many games dabble in Nordic folklore, but most of them cast you as axe-swinging ruffians or bearded giants ready to take on the beasts of yore. But *Röki* doesn't deal in action, or any kind of axe-swinging. It deals in kindness and a quiet sense of wonder.

PLAYED IT



As I first take control of *Röki*'s protagonist Tove (read: 'toe-vey'), a young girl sensibly dressed for Scandinavian winters with big boots, mittens and a bright red bobble hat, I'm greeted with nothing but the chirping of birds and the soft crunching of snow underfoot. The sun is low, throwing wide shadows from the trees onto the ground. It's incredibly peaceful. Tove isn't just out taking a nice stroll however – in order to save her family, she'll have to interact with mythical creatures and uncover the secrets of her homeland. But what she will not have to do is fight.

Developer Polygon Treehouse, consisting of former Guerrilla Cambridge



developers Alex Kanaris-Sotiriou and Tom Jones, is looking to make a game for all ages that is inspired by point-and-click adventures, but lets you move around freely around its fully-realised world. "A 3D environment allows you to explore more, makes you part of a wider space. We want you to breathe and take it all in," Kanaris-Sotiriou explains. Certain point and click elements, such as the option to combine items in your inventory still exist, but *Röki* is about its narrative first and foremost, rather than solving puzzles. To that end, Polygon Treehouse has partnered with narrative designer Danny Salfield Wadeson, who points out that a lot of *Röki*'s narrative is delivered through its environment. Tove records every find in her trusty journal, which is actually written

RÖKI IS VERY MUCH ABOUT BEING KIND TO NATURE AND THE CREATURES THEREIN

in the voice of a young child, rather than a collection of disembodied codex entries.

WINTER WONDERLAND

On my trek through the forest, I meet a troll called Trollhilde. With her hangdog expression and her big nose, she doesn't seem like much of a threat, and so I promise her to find something to remove a spear stuck in her rocky hide.

Röki is very much about being kind to nature and the creatures therein, no matter how monstrous they seem, but there is still something quietly unsettling about its atmosphere. "Well it would be," Kanaris-Sotiriou confirms, "You're girl alone in the woods. We tried to convey this unsettling feeling by camera angles that make it seem like something is hidden away and watching Tove. Players will always find help though, either via characters that show you the way or the diary." From this first impression, *Röki* does seem like a game for younger players, but the message is universal – true kindness begins with approaching something you're scared of.

Malindy Hetfeld

FREE WITH NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

YOUR ULTIMATE GUIDE TO **EVERYTHING** **NINTENDO!**



EXCLUSIVE OFFER!

10% Off your next order!

We've teamed up with the Nintendo Official UK Store to get you this amazing reader offer!



COMPETITION!

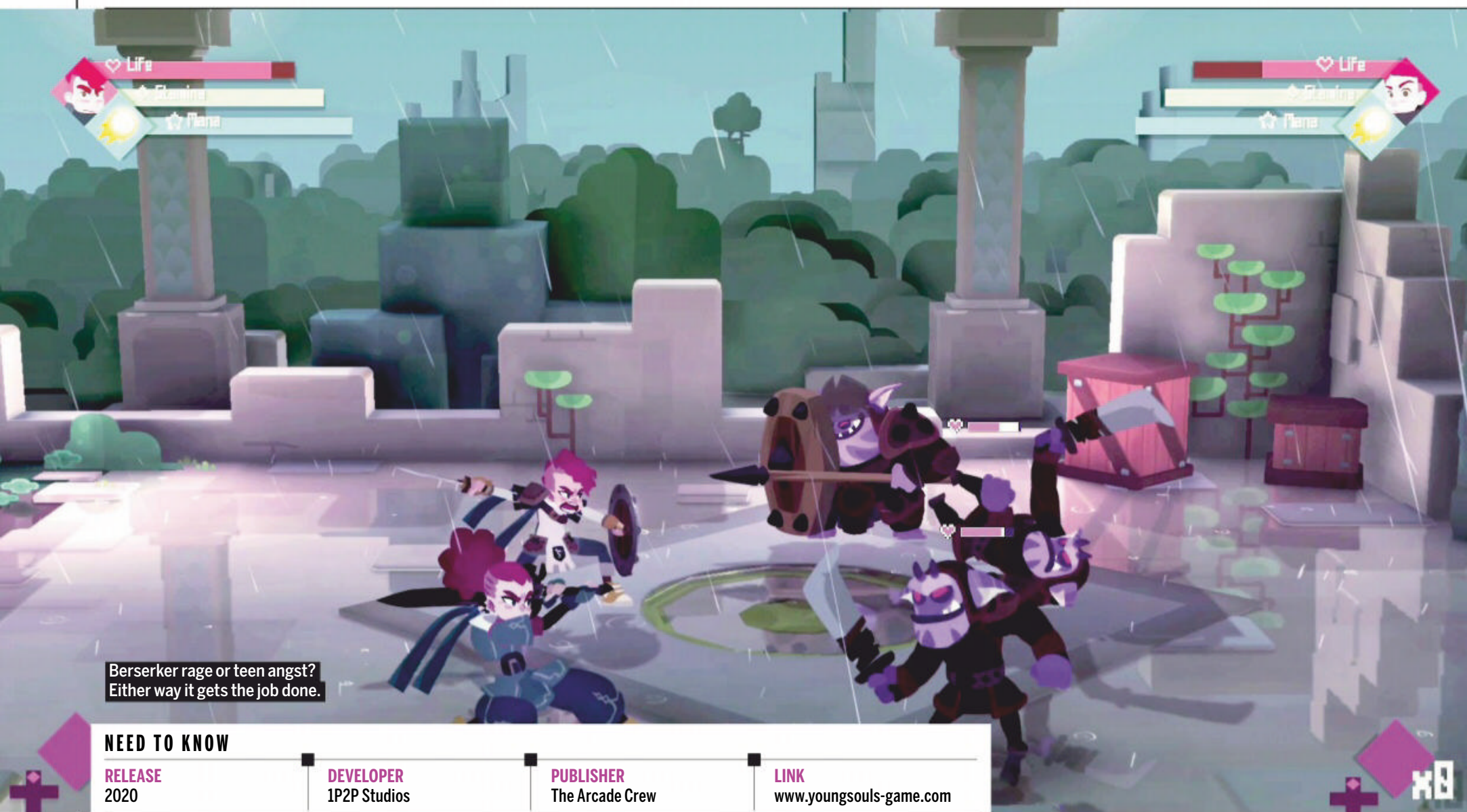
Win A Nintendo Switch Lite!

The all-new member of the Nintendo Switch family is up for grabs next issue!

LOOK OUT FOR THESE GREAT ADDITIONS
IN THE NEXT ISSUE, **ON SALE 14 NOVEMBER!**

PREVIEW

Young Souls



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2020

DEVELOPER
1P2P Studios

PUBLISHER
The Arcade Crew

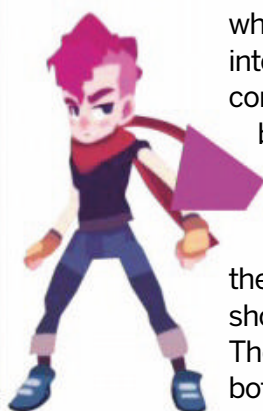
LINK
www.youngsouls-game.com

YOUNG SOULS

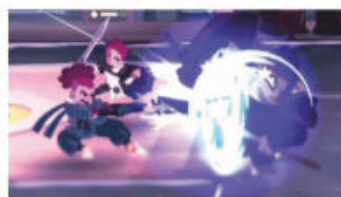
2D dungeon-crawling starring two teens with an axe to grind

The twins Jenn and Tristan are pretty much the kind of teenagers I wanted to be, both unbothered by the world around them and unbearably stylish. But this isn't mere nonchalance – still shaken by the loss of their father, they're tasked with stopping a threat coming from a world hidden below.

PLAYED IT



Through their own house, Jenn and Tristan enter a sprawling world of dungeons filled with monsters and gain magical powers that let them show fiends what's what. What makes *Young Souls* so interesting is that it's not just about combat and looting, but about striking a balance between the real world and the fantasy battles in the dungeons. During the day, Jenn practices fighting at a boxing gym, the two of them listen to records at the local music shop or buy sneakers at 'Solid Sneaks'. There's a wealth of clothes and shoes for both of them to pick up, and while none of



these have any gameplay benefits, they serve to invest your heroes with even more personality. Besides, dressing them up is fun in itself.

Young Souls acknowledges that the way to saving others is a hard one if you're carrying a hurt. The twins may swear a lot and look perpetually angry, but they're lashing out due to loneliness, and knowing about a secret world full of monsters is also a burden most games don't encourage you to think about. The dungeons below aren't all that different from our own world, either – shops sell armour and weapons instead of tracksuits and sneakers, but among the demons there are talking and feeling creatures just like us. I'm interested to see how all of this will shake out narratively, but my time with

STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN THE REAL WORLD AND THE FANTASY BATTLES

Young Souls is mostly spent clubbing a diverse cast of enemies.

SHUT UP! I HATE YOU!

You can play solo or co-op with a friend who can join at any point locally or online. Traversing dungeons from left to right, you go up against large hordes, much like in sidescrolling beat-'em-ups such as *Double Dragon* or *Streets of Rage*. Each dungeon of course ends in a spectacular boss battle. Smooth animations and great use of speed lines and flashes of light upon impact make combat a particularly vivid experience and navigating the chaos is great fun with another player.

Yet, *Young Souls* feels very forgiving – while there's stamina and mana to manage both for your attacks, blocking, and casting magic, it was nothing I ever had to keep my eye on. According to developer 1P2P, this is deliberate in order to keep the gaming experience frustration-free, but in the full game choosing the right armour and weapons will be crucial to achieving this effect for yourself. I can't wait to be an angry teen again.

Malindy Hetfeld



1,500
FOOTBALL PITCHES
EVERY DAY!

Did you know that European forests, which provide wood for making paper and many other products, have grown by 44,000km² over the past 10 years? That's more than 1,500 football pitches every day![†]

Love magazines? You'll love them even more knowing they're made from natural, renewable and recyclable wood



[†]UNFAO, Global Forest Resources Assessment 2005-2015.

Two Sides is a global initiative promoting the responsible use of print and paper which, when sourced from certified or sustainably managed forests, is a uniquely powerful and natural communications medium.

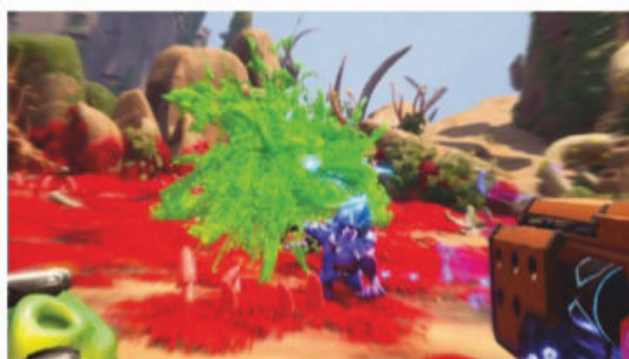
There are some great reasons to **#LovePaper**
Discover them now,
twosides.info



PREVIEW

Journey to the Savage Planet

I'm sorry birdie, I have to get to your marrow.

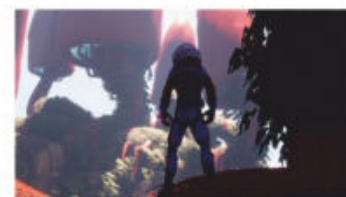
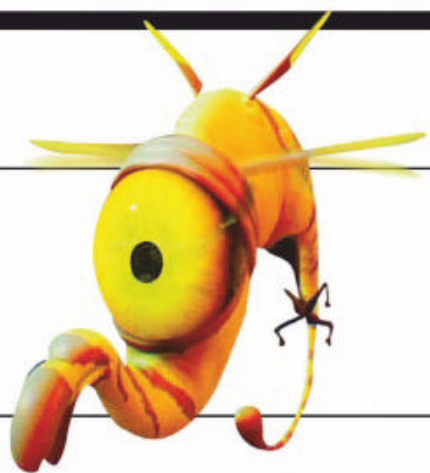


Many of the planet's inhabitants are friendly. Not sure about this one.



If you can see it, you can (eventually) climb it.

Journey to the Savage Planet



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
January 28, 2020

DEVELOPER
Typhoon Studios

PUBLISHER
505 Games

LINK
www.savageplanetgame.com

JOURNEY TO THE SAVAGE PLANET

Discover the comedy inherent in exploration in this adventure

Lead designer Alex Hutchinson calls *Journey to the Savage Planet* an “earnest comedy”. What he means by that is on the colourful planet you explore as part of the fourth best interstellar exploration company, you embrace that things can and will go wrong, and you get to laugh at yourself in the process.

The point of *Savage Planet*, and by extension exploration games in general, is that you don’t set off beset with sleek, expensive gear. Instead everything from your equipment to how you come across new locations and species, has a distinct air of improvisation to it. My jetpack belches huge clouds of smoke when I use it to double-jump onto a platform, and a wide-eyed, birdlike alien I shoot splatters me with goo. Kindred Aerospace, the company that sent your character on this planet, may run advertisements that make exploring seem like a luxurious business, but it’s more like doing dangerous manual labour without health insurance.

Hutchinson and I are playing a portion of the game’s later missions. You can play *JTTSP* alone but he strongly recommends diving in with a friend, “For me there’s something magical in two-player co-op in particular, just you and your best friend or you and your kid. I think especially that an exploration game is really well-suited for co-op, you’re starting a new experience and finding cool things together.”

My character has already received a few visor upgrades and gadgets in order

to discover new locations. This is a very Metroidvania approach – just finding your way in or up something is half the task, and if no solution presents itself, it’s probably because you’re missing the means to move ahead. Not to worry though, there are several missions to follow at any given time, and the planet, consisting of several different biomes, is open to you. “I didn’t want to make missions feel as if you’re working down a list of objectives. Ideally you’re going to look around and eventually remember there’s a mission to follow, but finding new places and upgrades organically around the world should be its own reward,” Hutchinson explains.

BELLY LAUGHS

After attacking one of the birds for the acid they secrete in order to open a door, a whole flock decides to swarm us.

Hutchinson gives one of them a hearty kick, hitting me and volleying me off a platform, right into a pool of lava. Startled, I laugh, realising that this is exactly the kind of comedy the game is going for. “The tools in your arsenal all allow for some fun,” Hutchinson says, “You have a binding ball for example, meant to be used to stick a creature to a spot, but you can of course also stick your partner to surfaces. Once I have

created something like this, I try to create as many situations as possible in which this could happen, either deliberately or accidentally.” It’s a technique Hutchinson used often when he worked on the *Far Cry* series, famous for nature being out to get you, at Ubisoft Montreal. Hutchinson wants you to make mischief.

Playing around with the acid bombs in my pack, I almost forget I have a gun. That, too, is deliberate. *Journey to the Savage Planet* isn’t a shooter, it’s a game where you sometimes shoot things. Even in that, it isn’t brutal – there’s a lot of shrieking and things going splat in a visually striking, cartoony way that underlines the chaos of battle. In the end, Hutchinson and I didn’t get a whole lot done in the traditional sense, but we found underground caverns, saw snowstorms in the distance and knocked into each other swinging from our grappling hooks, and I consider that time well spent.

Malindy Hetfeld

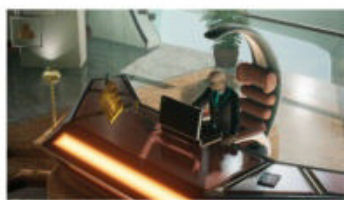
IT’S MORE LIKE DOING DANGEROUS MANUAL LABOUR WITHOUT HEALTH INSURANCE



Satan's Skin is a terrible name for a tanning salon.



This gamer bar is what I imagine despair looks like.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2020

DEVELOPER
Anshar Studios

PUBLISHER
Anshar Studios

LINK
gamedec.com

GAMEDEC

Hacking through virtual crimes in a cyberpunk detective yarn

Gamedec is a cyberpunk RPG from a Polish developer, but you'd never mistake it for *Cyberpunk 2077*. Set in Warsaw, in a future where people escape reality by plugging into virtual worlds, it's an isometric detective yarn that plays out case-by-case as you solve VR crimes with real consequences.

The hands-off demo, begins in a street soaked in rain and neon. There is, of course, a bar nearby. It's a watering hole for gamers that's filled with topless women and places for people to plug into VR. It's a sleazy, bleak joint, but we don't stick around. There's a client who needs the services of a gamedec, and they're waiting inside a free-to-play farming sim.

Each case is a discrete mission with several possible conclusions based on evidence you've collected, which you've then got to tie together like a cyberpunk Sherlock Holmes.

In this case the client wants someone to look into people getting sick while playing the farming sim, which also happens to be set in the Wild West.

Pretty quickly, this virtual world gets weird. There's a suspicious fella spying on people working the fields, a player collapses but isn't automatically logged out, and a mod is discovered that allows the user to accelerate time in the game. Each of them opens up a new avenue of investigation, but you can ignore them or get locked out of them, potentially losing that piece of information forever.

To find out more about the collapsed player, it's possible to hack the device they're connected to – the couch. Various skills can be used to give the gamedec the upper hand in when they're interrogating someone or exploiting a game, which can then become permanent 'aspects' that guarantee success. With the Hackerman aspect, for instance, the intelligence roll can be skipped during hacking attempts, making you a cyberspace wiz.

Anshar Studios CEO Lukasz Hacura says that the team prototypes the cases by running pen and paper sessions where players have to come up with their own solutions, then they pick the most interesting ones and try to implement them in *Gamedec*. It's still the illusion of choice, but it's rooted in the anything-goes philosophy of tabletop roleplaying.

ON THE CASE

There will be plenty of ways to solve a case, then, and even if you made terrible decisions and have a series of unlucky rolls, there are always going to be enough clues to close it – though maybe not to your satisfaction. You could even phone it in. Maybe you're a crappy detective, or maybe you've been paid to not follow the trail of evidence. Whatever conclusion is reached, however, the world just adapts and moves on.

Notably, nothing violent happens in the demo. That won't always be the case – you'll be able to shoot people, hack turrets and find other less than peaceful ways to find information, but there's no dedicated combat system. These opportunities will crop up as cases unfold and play out like other actions. Hacura likens it to *Detroit: Become Human*, though without the quick time events, but he emphasises that *Gamedec* is an RPG, not an adventure game, and bristles at the idea that RPGs need to have combat.

Despite once being prescient, cyberpunk can sometimes feel a bit stuck in the '80s, but *Gamedec* seems a lot more unconventional. It's exploring things like gold farming, exploitative game mechanics and the seedier side of the medium, so maybe it has something interesting to say. And a proper investigative RPG is also a rare treat, especially outside of tabletop games.

Fraser Brown

EACH CASE IS A DISCRETE MISSION WITH SEVERAL POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS



One of the virtual worlds has dinosaurs. I wish we had a screenshot of that.

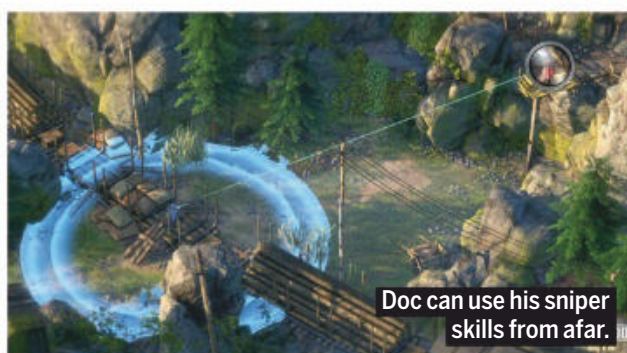
PREVIEW

Desperados III

Love is in the air.

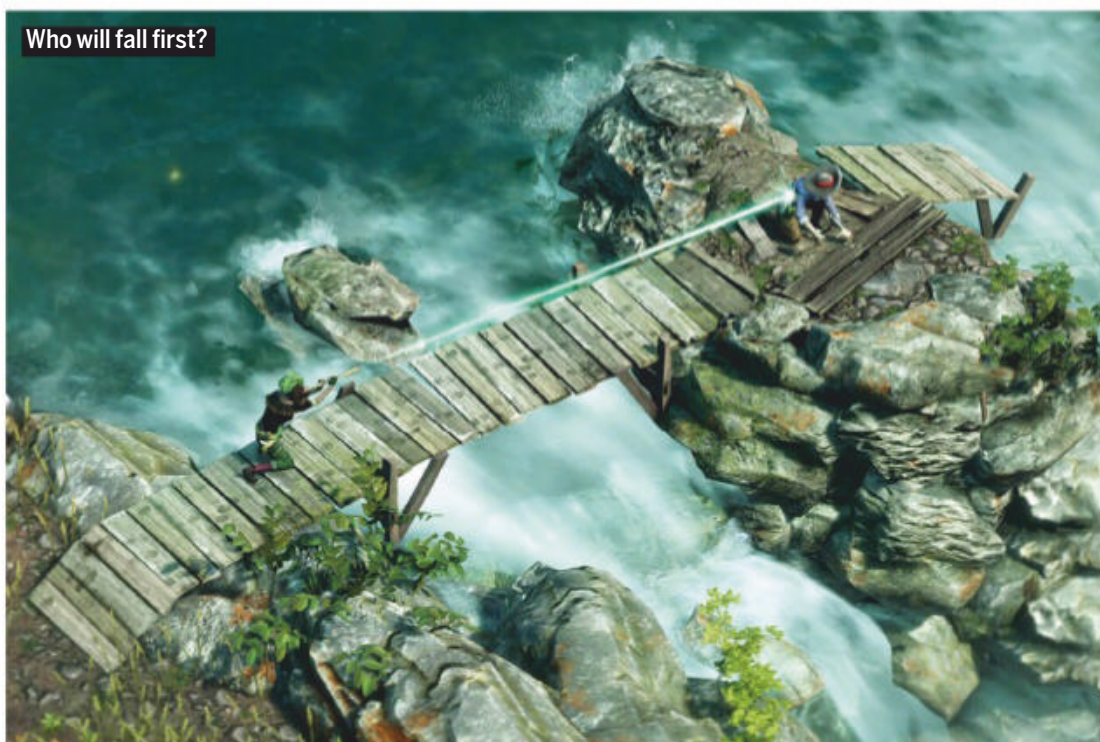


Vision cones do what vision cones do.



Doc can use his sniper skills from afar.

Who will fall first?





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019

DEVELOPER
Mimimi Games

PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

LINK
www.desperadosgame.com

DESPERADOS III

Witchcraft and the occult in the Wild West – yee, and indeed, haw

Desperados 3 lets you use dark magic to control the mind of a chicken, making it an unwitting participant in some good old-fashioned cowboy murder. This is thanks to Isabelle Monroe, the real-time stealth game's final and most unconventional playable character, whose mystical abilities would make her equally at home in *Dishonored*.

When I'm introduced to Isabelle she's been locked up by some bandits. While *Desperados* gives you a team of up to five, Isabelle starts out alone, though she's far from helpless. Around her cage are several guards, one of them holding the key, and accidents waiting to happen, like precariously piled crates. Isabelle can't reach them to do anything, but the guards can.

It's not just chickens that can be put under her spell. All humans and animals can be controlled, and they all come with their own, albeit limited, skillsets. People can still become suspicious if the character you're controlling does something odd, and all of Isabelle's powers have a blood price, but they're still extremely powerful.

A few minutes later, all but one of the guards are down, filled with bullet holes or crushed under crates, and the last man standing helpfully unlocks her cage. Most enemies can be also taken out with non-lethal methods and then tied up, but these guys definitely had it coming.

Just as useful is her ability to connect characters with a magical tether, so what

happens to one happens to another. She's got a cat, too, which can be used as a distraction if there aren't any chickens for you to control. If you're faced with a pair of guards, you could distract them with your cat, tether them, sneak up behind them, and kill both with a single slit throat. It also works on allies, so you can heal two at once. While these powers might seem out of place in a western, they're a perfect fit for a stealth sandbox, offering up a lot of creative ways to get in or out of trouble.

Taking out a few guards isn't a challenge for a solo desperado, but when there are patrols and larger groups you'll want to employ a bit of teamwork. Hector lugs around a bunch of bear traps, so you could drop them and command enemies to step on them. Or you could move them away from the group and into the crosshairs of the gang's sniper, Doc.

When you've got a plan involving multiple members of your gang and it needs to be timed precisely, you can use Showdown Mode. This pauses the game, giving you space to evaluate the map and assign orders to your gang that will be pulled off simultaneously. *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun* had a similar

NEW
INFO

feature, but without the ability to stop the clock it was easier to mistime an ambush or die immediately after while you're juggling characters.

BOOM TOWN

Despite being of the stealthy persuasion, *Desperados III* lets you throw subtlety out the window on occasion. You can launch sticks of dynamite, mow down enemies with gatling guns, and generally cause chaos. Some maps, like New Orleans, also have civil zones where you can walk around freely and do a bit of detective work. There's a hint of *Hitman*-style social stealth, so you can take a break from all the slinking around in the bushes.

With its isometric perspective and all the vision cones sprouting out of enemies, it will undoubtedly be familiar to *Desperados* and *Shadow Tactics* veterans, but it feels a bit grander and more ambitious. It's exciting to see it experimenting with different types of stealth and leaning into the sandbox elements even more – almost as exciting as mind controlling chickens.

Fraser Brown



DESPERADOS 3 LETS YOU THROW SUBTLETY OUT THE WINDOW ON OCCASION

techradar.



The home of technology

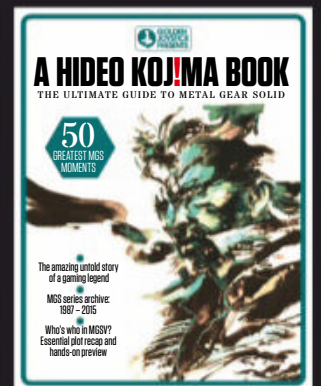
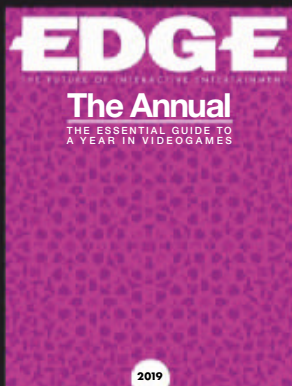
techradar.com

VOTE FOR YOUR FAVOURITE
PC GAME OF THE YEAR AT



— THE 37th —
**GOLDEN
JOYSTICK
AWARDS**

Best Storytelling? Most Wanted? Ultimate Game of the Year?
Let us know what you've loved from this great year of games
and get a **FREE e-bookazine** of your choice **worth up to £9.99!**



VOTE NOW
WWW.GOLDENJOYSTICKS.COM



facebook.com/**goldenjoysticks**



twitter.com/**GoldenJoysticks**

PRESENTED BY

gamesradar+

SPONSORED BY



CORSAIR



servers.com

INDUSTRY PARTNER

ukie

MEDIA PARTNERS

MCV
THE BUSINESS OF VIDEO GAMES

THE Sun

above



&

The entire planet is your playground as **MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR** takes the classic PC sim to new heights.

By Andy Kelly

eyond

y tiny Cessna light aircraft is barrelling down the terrifyingly short runway at Lukla, an airport nestled in the mountains of eastern Nepal that's said to be one of the most dangerous in the world. The end of the runway approaches fast as I yank back on the yoke, but I'm not getting any lift. I resign myself to my fate, but half a second before I slam into the barrier separating Lukla from the misty void below, the little plane lurches into the air and suddenly I find myself soaring down a deep, vast Himalayan valley scattered with little fluffy clouds.

Ten minutes later I'm flying over New York City, a dense urban sprawl that stretches as far as the eye can see, sunlight glinting off the skyscrapers. Then I'm above my hometown of Glasgow, Scotland in the thick of a torrential rainstorm. I can see the streets where I grew up below me. Then I'm somewhere over the Sahara. The Jökulsárlón glacier in Iceland. The lush valleys of New Zealand. Mount Fuji in Japan. Anywhere I can think of I can go, because in *Microsoft Flight Simulator* the entire world is literally at your fingertips.

It seems unbelievable, but as I spin a 3D globe around I realise that I can drop my plane anywhere on Earth and, after a short loading screen, start flying. This is possible because the game generates its world using satellite data pulled from Bing Maps. But you aren't just flying over a flat texture: the engine takes this map data then intelligently fills it in with trees, water, buildings, famous landmarks, and even little details such as traffic on the roads. Elevation is rendered accurately too, resulting in towering mountain ranges and yawning valleys.

Scattered across this 3D globe are white dots representing tens of thousands of airports. There are famous ones such as the aforementioned Lukla, New York's JFK, or London Heathrow. But there are countless smaller ones too, including Mataverí on Easter Island, the most remote airport in the world. I even managed to find and take off from RAF Linton-on-Ouse, a military airfield near me that I became aware of when I noticed fighter jets constantly flying over my house. You can start at an airport or just click somewhere on the planet and appear in the sky mid-flight. The scale is unreal.

ROUND THE WORLD FLIGHTS

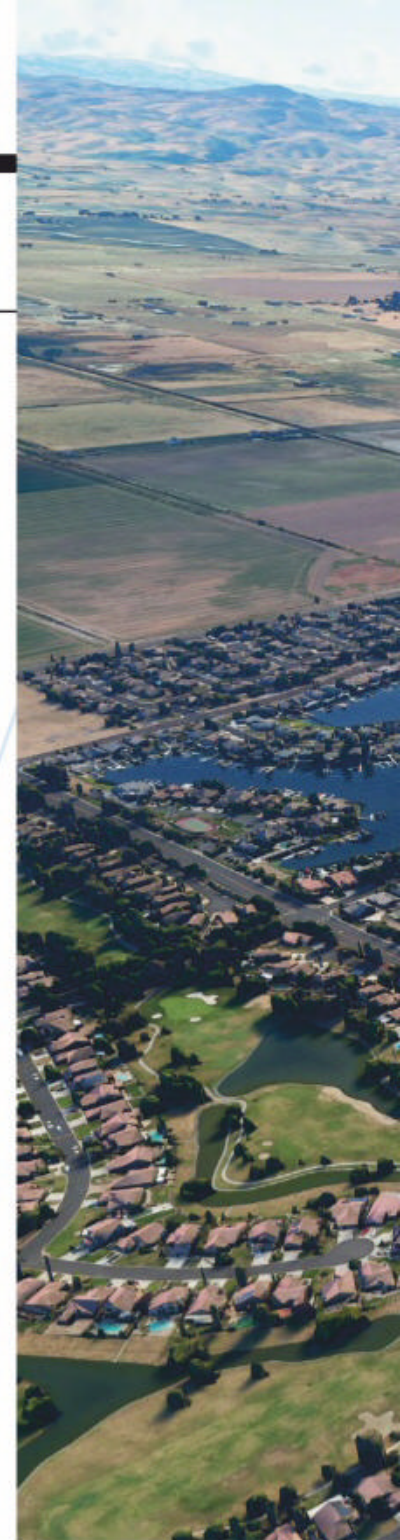
It's exhilarating being able to pick somewhere on the planet and almost instantly fly there. Like when you spin a globe, jab your finger on it to stop it, and fantasise about going wherever your digit landed – except here you can realise that fantasy, albeit virtually. You also have fine control over the weather and time of day, so if you want to cross the Atlantic during a thunderstorm, fly over Seoul at

night, or cruise along the French Alps at sunset, all you have to do is drag a few sliders then select that place as your starting point. You can change the weather and time of day in-game too, so if you're bored of clear skies you can call in a supercell storm to spice things up.

You can even use live weather data, meaning that if it's raining in London in real life, it'll be raining in the game too. Weather simulation is another thing that adds to the realism, with storms and other meteorological phenomena that don't just look and behave like they do in real life, but appropriately affect the handling of your plane as well. And thanks to a ridiculous 600km draw distance, it's possible to see storms long before you fly into them. If you get trapped in one, the dark, fat volumetric clouds around your plane are illuminated by cracks of lightning, which is as nerve-racking as it sounds.

The *Microsoft Flight Simulator* development team seems particularly proud of its clouds, and rightly so. They're colossal, voluminous, three-dimensional things, refracting and catching the light, swelling with darkness as rain accumulates, and drifting over the landscape, casting immense shadows as they go. Clouds can even

IF YOU'RE BORED OF CLEAR SKIES YOU CAN CALL IN A SUPERCELL TO SPICE THINGS UP



ABOVE: Weather simulation means you can fly in perpetually sunny skies.

RIGHT: You can turn various assists on and off as you see fit.

AIR MILES *Highlights from the series' storied history*



FLIGHT SIMULATOR 1.0 1982

Although the *Flight Simulator* series had been around since 1979 this was the first released under the Microsoft banner. "If flying on your IBM PC got any more realistic," an advertisement boasted. "You'd need a license."



FLIGHT SIMULATOR 3.0 1988

As well as new aircraft and airports, the third *Microsoft Flight Simulator* added high-res EGA graphics. It also introduced the ability to customise your HUD with multiple windows, each displaying a different view of your flight.



FLIGHT SIMULATOR 5.0 1993

This was the first edition of *Microsoft Flight Simulator* to use textures, which made for much prettier, more realistic flying. It also featured custom cockpits and the ability to fly over Europe for the first time.



FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2000 1999

This was a major leap forward for the series, which had stagnated in the '90s. It added snow and rain, 17,000 new airports, hazard objects such as radio towers, and simulated GPS. And yes, that is Concorde on the front of the box.



FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2004 2003

This edition of *Microsoft Flight Simulator* came bundled with several historical aircraft including the famous Wright Flyer. It also featured 3D cloud formations, localised weather systems, and interactive cockpits.



FLIGHT SIMULATOR X 2006

The most recent edition of *Microsoft Flight Simulator* added the ability for two players to fly a single plane as well as improved scenery and weather effects. This version of the sim still has a huge following and an active mod scene.



cast shadows on other clouds. The result is some of the finest skies I've ever seen on PC, and skies that are all the more impressive for being colossal simulations of intricate weather systems, not just pretty skyboxes.

Sims can be quite drab and lifeless, often trading visual fidelity for realism. But details like these make *Microsoft Flight Simulator* powerfully atmospheric. And that is, for me, one of the most exciting things about it. It has all the things a hardcore simulator fan demands from a game like this: licensed planes, realistic aerodynamics, physically simulated weather, icing, load factor, fuel consumption, thermic updrafts, and native support for a wide variety of sticks, yokes, and throttles. But the game doesn't merely want to replicate the cold, mathematical reality of flying, but the drama and romance of it too. It's flight as an experience, not just a series of calculations.

SOARING THROUGH THE SKIES

When you're cruising over the Seattle skyline as the sun dips below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the city, or you're soaring above Tokyo at night, an endless sea of lights stretching below you, this feeling is palpable. It reminds you that flying is an incredible, special thing. Granted, this is difficult to appreciate when you're squeezed into an economy seat, drinking a tiny can of Heinkenen, watching a below average Kevin Hart film. But when you're at the yoke of a plane in *Microsoft Flight Simulator*, free as the wind, it's utterly blissful. Now I understand why people get hooked on aviation, and why many of the dev team have started taking flying lessons.

Those remarkable visuals will undoubtedly result in a lot of new players drifting towards *Microsoft Flight Simulator* – even if they have no real interest in sim games. Microsoft is well aware of this and is promising an experience that can be heavily customised, whether you're



» the type of dedicated virtual pilot who has a plywood cockpit in their spare room, or someone who just wants to sprawl on the couch with a gamepad.

A large number of assists can be switched on or off, making flying as simple or complex as you like, or some combination of the two, perhaps. However, no matter how many assists you have enabled, the game will still use the same base aerodynamics simulation.

If you're wondering how your PC is going to cope with rendering the entire world, developer Asobo Studio explains that *Microsoft Flight Simulator* will rely on your internet connection, using something called adaptive streaming. The better your bandwidth, it says, the greater

I'M MOST EXCITED ABOUT MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR AS A RELAXATION TOOL

visual fidelity you'll experience. But the developer is also keen to stress that there will be an offline mode where you can pre-cache parts of the map to visit without being connected to the internet. It sounds like playing online will offer the best experience, and will let you enjoy features such as finding planes in the sky using live flight tracker data, then diving in and taking over the controls.

Of course a game attempting to recreate the whole planet is never going to be perfect. Even though the pre-alpha build of the game I play is impressively stable, and obscenely pretty, the world generation does have

ABOVE: The whole world is ready to be explored in *Microsoft Flight Simulator*.

FAR RIGHT: Get your sick bags at the ready if you're attempting some aerobatics.

FLIGHT RISK *Simulation versus reality*



After piloting a light aircraft over Lake Washington in the game, I was lucky enough to experience the same trip for real. I squeezed into a Cessna 162, the same model I flew in the sim, and took to the skies with an instructor. We flew over the lake and took in a few local sights including Snoqualmie Falls and downtown Seattle.

The instructor handled the technical stuff, but I was able to take the yoke for a while and I was amazed by how light and responsive it was – a sensation *Microsoft Flight Simulator* recreates to an impressive degree. It was a thrilling feeling being in command of that tiny plane and the game evokes the same sense of freedom.



LEFT TOP: Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane, definitely a plane.



LEFT MIDDLE: You can travel back to your hometown.



LEFT BOTTOM: It's a bit like if Google Maps was fun.

some issues. Occasionally it seems as if the engine hasn't properly processed or identified certain parts of the map, resulting in glitchy terrain, traffic driving into rivers, and other spots of weirdness.

I also encounter a few airports where the runway seemed to be in the sea, or just didn't exist at all. And it's pretty obvious when you get really close to the ground that it's all based on satellite maps.

But a developer reassured me that the procedural systems that detect and fill these details in are still being worked on, and that most of these bugs will eventually be ironed out. Still, they say, they couldn't possibly check every corner of the world for inconsistencies. It's so big that even they haven't, and likely never will, see certain parts of it. However, you do spend most of the game miles in the air, where it looks basically photorealistic when the weather and lighting are just right. So I'm sure most people will be willing to endure the odd graphical quirk in light of everything else the game is doing.

Honestly I think I'm most excited about *Microsoft Flight Simulator* as a relaxation tool. I'll dive into the simulation, sure, but I can see myself playing it mostly for the same reason I play *Euro Truck Simulator 2*: as a way to zen out. Some of the developers I spoke to acknowledged this, saying they often play this way themselves. Turn on the assists, pick a pretty part of the world, and just enjoy the ride. As big and wonderful as *Euro Truck* is, this definitely has it beat (and every other sim, for that matter) in terms of the sheer variety of locations on offer. I play the preview build for around four hours and I feel like I've barely dipped my toes in the pool. There's so much to discover here and I can't wait to spin that globe again and see where the wind takes me. ■



SUBSCRIBE

And get a ***FREE*** Turtle Beach Recon Headset

WORTH
£50



KEY FEATURES

- Recon 150 suitable for use with PC, PS4, PS4 Pro, Nintendo Switch and mobile.
- Large 50mm speakers and removable omni-directional microphone.
- Standard 3.5mm connection cable with splitter included.
- Independent game and chat volume controls.

SAVE UP TO 49%



Upgrade to include digital for an extra **£2.50**



SUBSCRIBE TO **PC GAMER** TODAY FOR JUST **£30 FOR 6 MONTHS**

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

ONLINE - myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/turtle19

PLEASE USE THE FULL ADDRESS TO CLAIM YOUR FREE GIFTS

OR CALL - 0344 848 2852 AND QUOTE 'TURTLE19'

TERMS & CONDITIONS Prices and savings are compared to buying full priced print and digital issues. You will receive 13 issues in a year. You can write to us or call us to cancel your subscription within 14 days of purchase. Payment is non-refundable after the 14 day cancellation period unless exceptional circumstances apply. Your statutory rights are not affected. Prices correct at point of print and subject to change. Full details of the Direct Debit guarantee are available upon request. UK calls will cost the same as other standard fixed line numbers (starting 01 or 02) or are included as part of any inclusive or free minutes allowances (if offered by your phone tariff). Gift is only available for new UK subscribers. Gift is subject to availability. Please allow up to 60 days for the delivery of your gift. In the event of stocks being exhausted we reserve the right to replace with items of similar value. For full terms and conditions please visit: bit.ly/magtandc. Offer ends 31/12/2019



INVADES

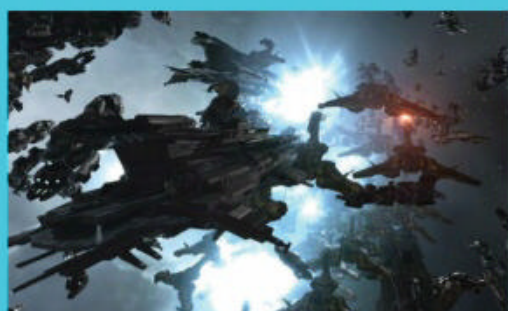
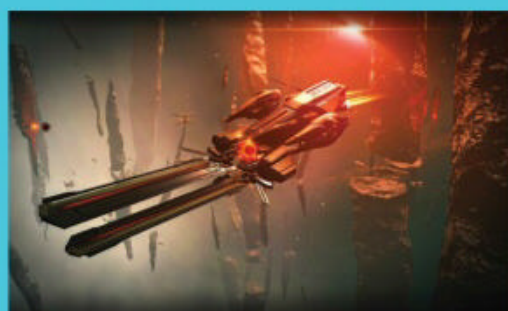
EVE
INVASION WORLD TOUR
FANFEST HOME
WELCOME

My strange, naked weekend with **EVE ONLINE**'s developers and a dozen Finnish players.

By Steven Messner

FINLAND

EVE Fanfest



Exploring deep space and further in *EVE Online*.

You don't really know *EVE Online* until you're crammed into a hot tub full of drunk, naked Finnish players and two developers chatting excitedly about chaos and wormholes. I've travelled thousands of miles to end up here, in a stranger's house on an island called Kemiönsaari, the boondocks of Finland. My journey to this county of some 6,000 Swedes and Finns isn't just for pleasure, however. I'm here to cover a historic event in PC gaming – *EVE Online*'s first-ever Fanfest to be held inside of one lucky player's house.

Normally these events are held in developer CCP Games' home of Reykjavík, Iceland, and thousands of players from all over the world fly to party with the developers and learn about what's next for *EVE Online*. Last year, though, CCP Games decided to take the show on the road and also solicit invitations from players to host a Fanfest from their very own home.

Fanfest Kemiönsaari (or Fanfest Home) is a surreal combination of a traditional gaming convention and a house party – keynote speeches and Q&A sessions spliced with barbecue burgers and vodka shots. When I told my parents about this trip, they were convinced it was an elaborate murder plot that would end with me flayed in a torture den somewhere. They did not predict the pale parade of nude, drunk *EVE* players shuffling to and from the sauna and hot tub. It's a fitting opening ceremony for this next chapter of *EVE Online*, one that its developers promise will bring mayhem to its hundreds of thousands of players and their precious empires.

DESTINATION KEMIÖNSAARI

The winner of Fanfest Home's contest is a player named Lilianah, a construction worker and member of a Finnish-only wormhole corporation called Avanto. "When I heard that six developers were on their way here, I was

[confounded]," Lilianah says, laughing. "Here. Six devs. But I thought, what the hell. The sauna is warm, this is what we do."

Like any *EVE* Fanfest, the event started with a parade, only this one was composed of about a dozen people and only lasted the length of Lilianah's driveway. Everyone then piled inside Lilianah's house where his wife had prepared snacks and drinks. Slipping through the back to look at the hot tub, I stumble across his two children – one deeply engrossed in a round of *Fortnite* on his PC. Fortunately, Lilianah's family

have the good sense to clear out later that evening, once the sauna and hot tub get fired up.

Instead of a normal keynote presentation, CCP Games creative director Bergur Finnbogason and CEO Hilmar Veigar Pétursson livestreams a three-hour fireside chat, talking everything from *EVE Online*'s sci-fi inspirations, original designs, to vague plans for the future. But the most relevant part of that chat has to do with the nature of chaos, *EVE Online*'s inherent inability to create it, and why CCP Games is now stepping in to make some of its own.

Image credit: Petteri Kari



ABOVE: The audience for Fanfest Home's keynote.

RIGHT: There was even a DJ. No one danced.

TOP RIGHT: Petursson (left) and Finnbogason (right). Credit: Petteri Kari

CHAOS THEORY If *EVE*'s developers need some help creating mayhem, they only need to look at other MMOs for inspiration



CORRUPTED BLOOD PLAGUE WORLD OF WARCRAFT

In 2005, a bug in *WoW*'s newest raid turned into an infectious disease that quickly wiped out entire cities' worth of players for a week. People went into full-blown survivor mode.



A REALM REBORN FINAL FANTASY XIV

FFXIV's first version sucked so bad that Square Enix remade it – but not before destroying the world in a cosmically apocalyptic event that saw the bad guys win.



FALADOR MASSACRE RUNESCAPE

In 2006, a *Runescape* in-game house party started a bloodbath when players discovered a glitch that let them attack other players anywhere without consequence.



**“WE, AS THE CARETAKERS
OF THE UNIVERSE,
HAVE TO STEP IN”**

AGENTS OF ANARCHY

EVE Online has officially entered what CCP Games is calling The Chaos Era. It's a time of significant upheaval, CCP Games CEO Hilmar Veigar Pétursson tells me. On June 26, 2019, that chaos took the form of a surprise alien invasion that all but paralysed the massive player empires found in null-sec space.

Entire wars were called off as invading armies retreated home to save their precious starbases, jump gates, and industrial facilities from what many feared would be complete annihilation.



Then CCP Games announced a communications blackout across all in-game chat channels in null-sec space. Now when you venture into null-sec, the in-game chat interface no longer lists what other players are in a solar system with you. That means players or roving armies can move from system to system without having their presence being immediately given away.

These surprise invasions and changes serve a greater purpose than just upsetting delicate political and industrial machines, however. It's a radical experiment to save *EVE Online*. “If you look at the game from the vantage point that we look at the game every day, the game starts to speak to you,” says Finnbogason. “You follow the economy, you follow the meta, and you start to understand that there is pain, the game is in pain. It needs hand-holding because we don't have the systems to automatically regulate it.”

“Right now the situation in the game is such that the stagnation has been setting slowly over a few years and there is no end in sight,” Pétursson says. “It's just going to stagnate. You don't want your sandbox to turn into cement, so it needs to be moved around a bit.”

“And we, as the caretakers of the universe, have to step in. We want the

game to be built, owned, and operated by its playerbase. But right now we have to.”

MASTERS OF CONTROL

Though *EVE Online* has expanded significantly over 16 years, players have largely been playing and mastering the same game – consistently smashing hypothetical boundaries along the way. Player-made alliances like The Imperium boast 40,000 characters. Supercapital ships, once the prize of only a few players, now number in the thousands like an ever-increasing nuclear stockpile.

Even the wormholes, a transient network of hostile, isolated systems designed only to be temporarily explored, are now colonised permanently by enterprising players.

“The conceit of *EVE* is that it's a chaotic sandbox for you to reign and to order, and we give people the tools to organise themselves,” Pétursson explains to me. “The amazing alliance leadership of *EVE* has leveraged their ability to organise people at scale, and now the world is too orderly and not chaotic.”

Right now, CCP Games is manually injecting chaos to disrupt its own players' ability to organise and create order. But Pétursson says the company is investigating options



EVE Fanfest

with procedural generation and artificial intelligence to empower *EVE Online* to create its own kind of chaos.

In the same way that the destructive effects of global warming are a consequence of humankind's own industrialisation and growth, *EVE Online* could one day possess a kind of sentience that allows it to counteract the will of its players. Dynamically generated cosmic disasters, more surprise alien invasions – anything could be possible. You'd think that this kind of chaos would be scary to *EVE*'s players, but many of them welcome it. The members of the Avanto corporation, in particular, are eager to see "chaos come to wormholes".

After Finnbogason and Pétursson finished their fireside chat, the stream stayed on with cameras set up in different rooms of Lilianah's house to film the Fanfest Home attendees as they mingled and chatted. Meanwhile, Finnbogason grilled burgers (his nickname of CCP Burger is well-earned) to feed everyone.

I spoke with several members of Avanto who were eager to see how CCP could shake up their way of life. To date, The Chaos Era has only affected the large empires found in *EVE Online*'s null-sec region of space, but they're just one-quarter of *EVE Online*'s four major player groups – each with their own needs and preferred playstyle.

Wormhole corporations like Avanto, for example, are a fearless bunch who have colonised the treacherous, uncharted solar systems known as Anoiikis. When

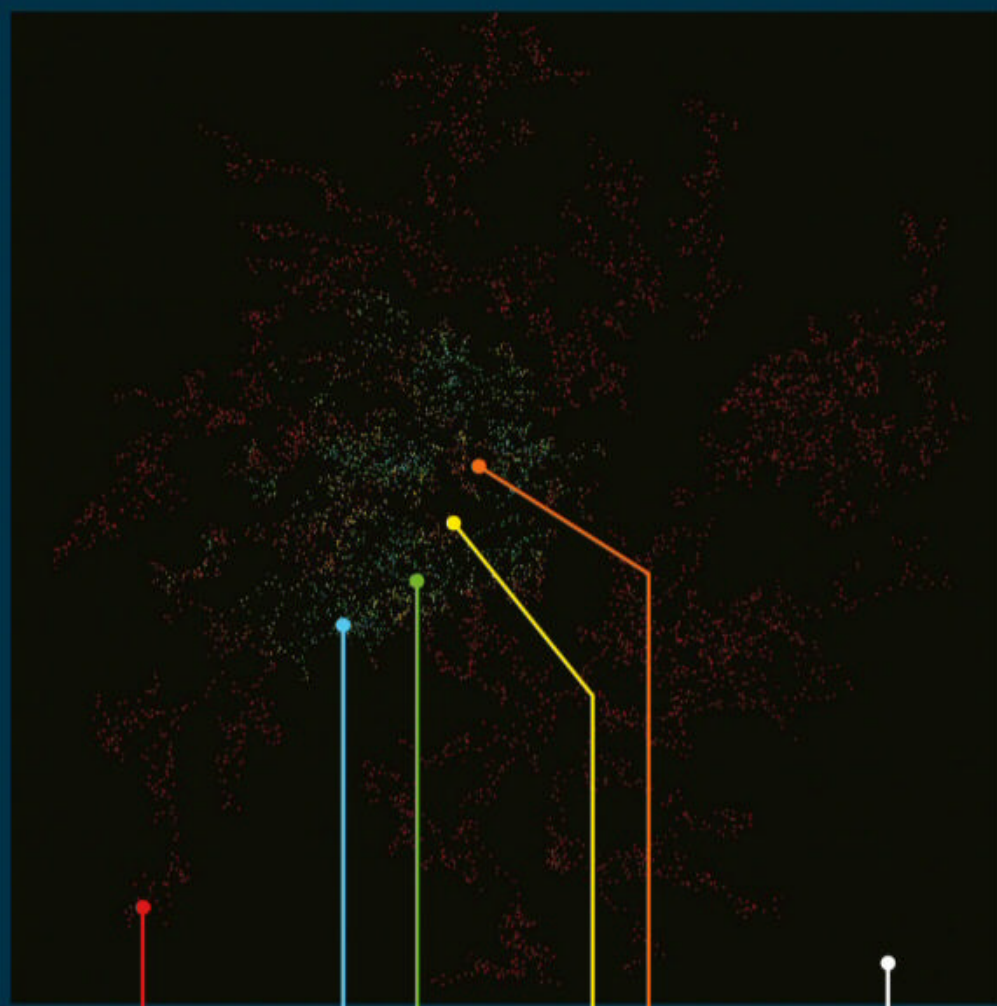


ABOVE: Lilianah's house (hot tub and sauna not shown).

RIGHT: Only thing Finns love more than saunas.



FEELING SECURE *The galaxy is a dangerous place to explore. Here's a breakdown of EVE's major regions*



The 3,294 **RED** dots represent *EVE*'s null-sec solar systems. There are no laws here, except those created by *EVE*'s player-run empires that battle for supremacy.

The 1,090 **GREEN** and **BLUE** dots are called high-sec. This is *EVE*'s relative safe zone, where any unwarranted violence is punished by retribution from *EVE*'s NPC police.

The 817 **ORANGE** and **YELLOW** dots represent low-sec, where *EVE*'s pirates tend to hang out. Killing other players can result in you being marked as a criminal.

Somewhere out there are 2,600 wormhole systems that are everywhere and nowhere at once. *EVE*'s bravest (and often scariest) players call these systems home.

wormholes were first introduced in 2009, CCP never imagined that players would actually live inside of the Anoiikis star systems. The wormholes that connect them to the known parts of *EVE*'s universe are constantly moving. Every day you wake up with new – and potentially hostile – neighbours. It was too chaotic, CCP thought.

But in the decade since wormholes have come out, players have cracked the code of how these connections work and built an entire science around manipulating them. They can estimate with alarming accuracy just how long a given wormhole will last, where it'll go, and how much mass can pass through it before it collapses. "Wormhole mechanics are pretty much used up," Lilianah says. "In general, wormholers are a really resourceful group. We shouldn't even be able to live there. So let the chaos come, we are looking forward to it."

HOT TUB SPACE-TIME MACHINE

That desire for chaos was reflected again and again as the night went on and, inevitably, clothes were shed. Being from Canada, I had no idea what a sacred ritual saunas were – or that there were so many different philosophies about how best to use one. "The Germans," one Finnish man tells me, wiping sweat from his face as he dumps another cup of water on the coals, "they are very strict about sauna. They have rules, like you have to stay for at least five minutes and you cannot sauna if you are too old or too young. But us? Not so much."

During the car ride back to Helsinki the next day, it becomes clear that Finnbogason and Pétursson have some ambitious ideas about what shape *EVE Online* is going to take as it begins to enter its third decade of life. After so many years of working on the same MMO, their connection to it has almost become supernatural.

"Think about it like *EVE* is an organism. *EVE* does not like where it's going. It's no longer limber. It's lost its stamina and mobility. It feels a little stiff. *EVE* comes to me in a dream and says, 'Hilmar, release the hounds of war,'" Pétursson tells me, referencing his decision to implement The Chaos Era. "That's how it happened. It came to me in a dream and it said, 'This cannot go on. I do not like this, this is not what I was meant to be'. The game has a purpose. It wants to finish its mission, and its mission is much larger than what it has executed in the last 16 years." When I ask what *EVE Online*'s purpose is, Pétursson is silent for a minute. "I think its mission is



Players have even been setting up home within wormholes.



world domination,” he finally says. “I think it wants to establish a new invention. At some point we didn’t have countries and now we have countries. We didn’t have companies, now we have companies. At some point we didn’t understand what a virtual world that’s more meaningful than real life was, but *EVE* is on a mission to make that happen.”

But before *EVE Online* can become the metaverse players have been dreaming of, Pétursson says it needs to better simulate the

conditions of our own reality. It has to learn how to make its own chaos.

“If you’re trying to figure out how the universe works, you put two atoms into a particle accelerator, you smash them together, and you look at the debris,” says Pétursson. “The Chaos Era is a little bit like that. We are not smart enough – nobody is smart enough – to understand what we might find. It’s not even the exercise of trying to predict what it is. You just have to have the courage to walk into the chaos.” ■



“THINK ABOUT IT LIKE EVE IS AN ORGANISM. EVE DOES NOT LIKE WHERE IT’S GOING”

CRIMINAL

AL EMPIRE

The past, present, and future
of Rockstar's world-conquering
GRAND THEFT AUTO ONLINE.

By Andy Kelly

From the very beginning, Rockstar North wanted *Grand Theft Auto V*'s multiplayer mode to faithfully replicate the *GTA* experience online, with the same level of quality as singleplayer. "We used the game's architecture, geography, and mechanics as a foundation and wanted the same kind of wide array of activities, and the ability to build on them to create new experiences," says Rob Nelson, co-studio head at Rockstar North, reflecting on the *GTA Online* journey so far.

"We've always wanted to build these immersive, complex living worlds to hold our stories, regardless of whether it's for a single player or multiple," he says. "We had created complex systems for weather, traffic, population, and more, to give people as much freedom as we possibly could to create unique experiences."

"And creating online versions of these worlds has shown us how to deepen and extend those experiences in new ways. By letting players share the space together, and through activities like heists, we help people create stories of their own, and over time they become more connected to the world."

Grand Theft Auto Online has been around since 2013, on Xbox 360 and PS3, and the original release seems almost simplistic compared to what exists today. When it first launched there wasn't all that

much to do, but now there are countless distractions, from running guns to robbing banks.

I ask Nelson how the game people are playing now compares to the studio's original vision.

"It's in line with our initial ideas, but six years on from launch, and even longer since we initially conceptualised it, it's grown deeper and evolved in more directions than we sketched out," he says. "*GTA Online* players are comprised of a series of smaller audiences that like to play it in different ways. So with the foundations in place we started creating updates that served each of these audiences."

BASK IN ROBBING

There have been a not insignificant 31 updates for *GTA Online* since 2013. Some, like 2014's *I'm Not a Hipster* add new clothes, cars and jobs; others, such as 2015's long-awaited

"WE STARTED CREATING UPDATES THAT SERVED EACH OF THESE AUDIENCES"



1 Updates bring new cars and colours to *GTA Online*.

2 Get your Tron on with the futuristic Shotaro sports bike.

3 Get behind the wheel of the Overflod Autarch.

Heists, change the game entirely. "As we became more confident that fans would understand how these updates would connect to the regular world of *GTA Online*," says Nelson. "It freed us up to create even crazier updates."

Cunning Stunts, which added wild Hot Wheels-esque tracks to the game, with boosts, corkscrews, and jumps, is perhaps the best example of this. While exaggerated and larger than life in its own way, *Grand Theft Auto V*'s singleplayer is at least rooted in some kind of logic or realism. But in the anarchic *GTA Online*, Rockstar can do anything it likes, whether it makes sense or not.

Parity between singleplayer and multiplayer has been a priority for Rockstar for years, and this is

particularly evident in its most recent game, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, which blends the two even more seamlessly than *GTA V*. I ask Nelson how making content for a solo player compares to creating it for many.

"You are trying, wherever possible, to ensure that players can feel central to the action and essential to whatever is going on," he says. "Particularly at the highest level with something like the heists. You're trying to design inside an open world for players that may be very distant from each other."

"But at the same time you want the action to feel like it's moving forward for everyone at roughly the same time. When it works it feels incredible"

EXTRA LIFE Some of the best *GTA Online* updates



HEISTS 2015

Grand Theft Auto Online launched in 2013, but it wasn't until 2015 that players finally got the chance to indulge in multiplayer heists. These epic multi-part missions are some of the most challenging in the game, but also the most lucrative, for obvious reasons.



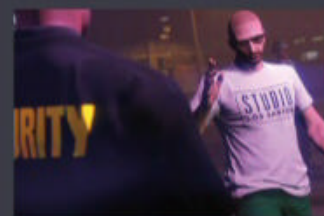
CUNNING STUNTS 2016

This update added a massive selection of outlandish stunt races to *GTA Online*, featuring death-defying loops, boost pads, jumps, and twisting tracks that snake for miles into the sky. *Cunning Stunts* is *GTA Online* at its most ridiculous and anarchic.



GUNRUNNING 2017

This update brought a selection of military-based business opportunities to *GTA Online*. Players could purchase a bunker and get involved in arms trading. New vehicles were also added, including an anti-aircraft trailer and an armoured APC.



AFTER HOURS 2018

Nightclubs were added to *GTA Online* in the After Hours update. These could be purchased by players to run as a lucrative business. But you could also pay the club a visit, drink, dance, and listen to sets by real-world DJs including Tale of Us and Black Madonna.



DIAMOND CASINO 2019

For years people have wondered if the empty casino in Los Santos would ever open, and this year it finally did. This update added gambling minigames such as blackjack and roulette, as well as new missions, vehicles, jobs, and races.





1



2



3

» and we're really proud of what we created for the *Heists* content, and how we've managed to push those ideas forward between the original set and the structure of the *Doomsday Heist*. And we think we can improve on them even further."

One of the most impressive things about *GTA Online* is how Rockstar has managed to squeeze six years of content out of one world. Los Santos and Blaine County, the countryside surrounding it, are big, sure, but not that big. I ask Nelson if having this relatively limited space to work with makes releasing *GTA Online* content, while ensuring it feels fresh and exciting, is a challenge for the team.

"It's not really a limitation, because it's a framework to create in," says

Nelson. "It's really about getting creative with every corner of the world so that players can see aspects of its design with fresh eyes, and building architecture and other parts of the game with a view to having multiple possible uses for them."

"We can go 'into' the world by creating additional interiors like the Maze Bank Arena, missile silos, or the underground bunkers. But we also have the opportunity to change the topography in major ways, like the Diamond Casino & Resort building. There's a lot more we can do with the world we've made before we're going to feel like we're pushing the limits of what it can handle."

"We have great people at every level of the company who play the game all the time and who are constantly coming up with new ways to add to the world. It's a credit to the entire team, from the initial world-building that sets up the universe, through to scripting, animation, and the mission design."

One of the most interesting developments in *GTA Online* didn't come entirely from Rockstar. The role-playing scene on PC has grown in popularity recently, with people running custom servers that let you play the game like a kind of bizarre life simulator, including getting a job and following permadeath rules.

"It's fascinating," says Nelson when I ask him how Rockstar feels about it. "People are taking it far beyond traditional game structures and we love seeing what people get up to. They've essentially had to break the game down to do it, but it

shows that not only are people constantly looking for ways to create different kinds of immersive experiences, but that others enjoy watching what

they do. We've always wanted people to role-play. Even in the singleplayer games we're providing an opportunity to play as a character in a specific kind of world."

"As we have developed our online worlds we've wanted it to be an opportunity for players to role-play as their own characters within the structure of that world we've built. In *Red Dead Online* we took another step by giving players specific roles, but we think there's a lot of ways we can improve that experience."

So some players like to role-play, but what other kinds of *GTA Online* players are there? I ask Nelson what Rockstar North has learned about player habits while working on the game. "The most interesting thing, but maybe not surprising, is that what people say they want isn't necessarily what they want."

1 Create mad tracks with the *Cunning Stunts* update.

2 Mow down everyone with the *Gusenberg Sweeper*.

3 On your bike for some fun in the *Bikers* DLC.

"Sometimes we will release an update and see a lot of negative social media feedback. But we learn by the way that people are engaging with it that it's actually really popular. We've always been trying to deliver something our audience will enjoy and we've learned a ton about the game through player habits."

"Player feedback is always a part of our overall decision-making process in terms of guiding the moving parts of any given update. We often have the larger concepts we want to pursue from update to update as part of our near-to-long-term planning, but the team is constantly looking at player data or the feedback the community sends us to see how we can improve what we're building as we go."

"We try to learn lessons from everything we do and apply them to the next project, so the first place *GTA Online* design has and will continue to have an influence is the design of *Red Dead Online*. The games have a different feel and pace, but creating passive mode for *GTA Online* was really helpful when we were designing the defensive playing style for *Red Dead Online*. We now have an amazing opportunity to evolve two very distinct worlds in different directions."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As for the future of *GTA Online*, Rockstar has no immediate plans to stop working on it. "We try to keep plans going roughly a year out, but we want to have the flexibility to be responsive to any changes," says Nelson. "So we choose not to telegraph that entire timeline to players. That said, players should feel confident that we have a ton of brand new ideas still to come. It's been six years and we just hit record player numbers and we are all incredibly grateful to everyone who's been with us along the way."

"In terms of what's coming up, Halloween should be a lot of fun this year and we've got really exciting plans for later in the holiday season and beyond." ■

SNOW JOKE *A festive treat*

Every holiday season, snow falls in *GTA Online* and turns the usually sun-baked city of Los Santos into a crime-ridden winter wonderland. From December 25, for 48 hours, the city and countryside are coated in a sheet of the powdery stuff. Players are also treated to discounts on cars, guns, and other luxury items, as well as gaining access to hideous Christmas jumpers and a range of festive photo filters.



TIME TO STEP OFF THAT TREADMILL

With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.



PRESS PAUSE
ENJOY A MAGAZINE MOMENT

To find out more about Press Pause, visit:
pauseyourday.co.uk

SongBird & Symphony



The cutest musical platformer ever composed is now available on
Nintendo Switch, PlayStation[®] 4 and Steam!



© 2018 JoySteak Studios. All rights reserved. Published by PQube Ltd.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Ah shit, here we go again

The gaming world is cyclical, and in some ways this month's reviews just feel like doing our due diligence.

FIFA, PES, Gears of War, Borderlands – is this 2019 or 2009?

And yet, like a document photocopied too many times, strange glitches creep in year by year. *Gears* loses two words, while elsewhere *PES* tries to sneak a new one past us. *Borderlands'* out-of-date references reach a kind of feverish mania, but then a furious honking on the wind heralds the arrival of something quite new. 2019 may be the year we find ourselves saying 'FIFA is very polished but the actual football isn't quite as good as in *PES*' for the millionth time, but it's also the year thousands came together to rejoice in stealing a gardener's flat cap. The more things stay the same, the more they change.

ROBIN VALENTINE
MANAGING EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



Contents

- 60** Borderlands 3
- 64** **Blair Witch**
- 66** Untitled Goose Game
- 68** **Gears 5**
- 70** The Surge 2
- 74** **Crying Suns**
- 76** Blasphemous
- 78** **eFootball PES 2020**
- 80** FIFA 20
- 82** **Greedfall**

- 84** Ni No Kuni Remastered

FREE GAMES

- 86** Discomfort
- 87** **Mr Flipper**
- 87** Goreball

THEY'RE BACK

- 88** No Man's Sky
- 89** **Heat Signature**
- 89** To The Moon
- 89** **FTL**
- 89** Endless Space 2

This month's freedom fighters...



JAMES DAVENPORT
Specialist in
Enduring poo jokes
Currently playing
Borderlands 3
This month
Permanently
damaged his
sense of humour.



LUKE KEMP
Specialist in
Pastoral chaos
Currently playing
Untitled Goose Game
This month
Made his PC Gamer
review debut with the
month's best water
fowl simulator.



PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
The excruciating
minutiae of football
Currently playing
FIFA 20, PES 2020
This month
Made a bunch of
sports references
Robin didn't get.



LAUREN MORTON
Specialist in
Pining for a new
Dragon Age
Currently playing
Greedfall
This month
Explored a New World
that feels oddly like an
old one.



CHRIS SCHILLING
Specialist in
Childhood wonder
Currently playing
*Ni No Kuni
Remastered*
This month
Discovered the magic
of Welsh people.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Ritual summoning
Currently playing
Discomfort
This month
Relived the grinding
existential horror
that was gaming in
the '90s.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Alien lactation
Currently playing
No Man's Sky
This month
Rode the hippo-lizard
and supped its cosmic
milk. Not a drugs
thing, as it turns out.

SKAGOLOCIAL

Wild guns fall to bad jokes in
BORDERLANDS 3. By James Davenport

Borderlands 3 is a game with long, earnest quests about how darn good coffee is punctuated by gore and gun violence. Borderlands 3 walks by dog poo, laughs at it, and then sets it ablaze. Borderlands 3 stays up until 11.30pm drinking soda and looking up crass Flash animations, taking notes. It's stuck in the late 2000s, when basic vulgarity was enough to qualify as edgy. Borderlands 3 is seriously obsessed with turds.

It's stuck in a time when memes lasted months rather than days, when referential humour was still a novelty and not exhausting, when you could point at something the slightest bit abnormal or gross and call it a joke. Simpler times, not necessarily better times.

Borderlands 3 feels like a retro shooter rather than alive and present in modern humour and pop culture. It's simultaneously repulsive and compulsive, an FPS RPG that excels when its weapon generation system spits out guns that feels great to shoot, adorned with broken attributes capable of turning hordes of goons, bugs, and soldiers into clouds of red mist, elemental particles, explosions, and big damage numbers. Then it tells one of its many long, bad jokes and the cloud dissipates. I have horrific whiplash.

With Borderlands 3 a few things have changed, but to little effect. It's still a Diablo-like masquerading as a shooter, now with new traversal moves, gorgeous gun models, and

improved weapon feedback. But Gearbox has done little to build on the Borderlands formula, while chucking the pitch perfect writing of Tales From the Borderlands in the bin. It's the best and the worst of the series at once.

I help a guy escape from a porta-potty for a poo-spewing rocket launcher

BUM NOTE
Tales From the Borderlands proved that the Borderlands universe could balance goofy slapstick comedy with great character work. It irreversibly

changed what I expect from the series. But Borderlands 3 opts for a best-of approach, something like a sitcom clip show. The new space travel setup takes the player on a tour of the galaxy in search of yet more vaults, each stop an excuse to roll out an old character only for them to disappear or fade into the background as soon as they say hello, shoot some folks, and crack a few one-liners in sidequests that do little to reveal anything about them or test them in any way.

Most don't change or press on the main narrative in vital ways,

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT?**
A chatty looter shooter with a pure heart and weak humour
- EXPECT TO PAY**
£50
- DEVELOPER**
Gearbox Software
- PUBLISHER**
2K Games
- REVIEWED ON**
RTX 2080, i9-9900k, 32 GB RAM, SSD
- MULTIPLAYER**
4-player co-op
- LINK**
borderlands.com

functioning as conduits for strained laughs or the rare serious moment, but rarely both. Some of them even disappear for good, with little ceremony or reflection. It's as if I'm meant to come to Borderlands 3 with a preexisting deep affection for them all, and just seeing them should be enough to win my heart.

The new big bads, the Calypso Twins, are murderous livestreamers whose motives only become clear when you reach the final act. Until then, they're just two cartoon villains who take up beef with the vault hunter, gunning to open the same vaults and collect the power within. Even as a parody of livestreamers, they offer no commentary.

There are few genuine jokes, dramatic beats, or interesting character moments in Borderlands 3. For example, a few quests: I collect brown rock specimens (poo) for a guy obsessed with brown rock specimens (poo), I plant dynamite in a massive poo dam to save a farm, I help a guy escape from a porta-potty for a poo-spewing rocket launcher – it's borderline unbearable.

Another makes fun of exploitative microtransactions and buggy early access games with a boring quest that forces me to either spend in-game cash for an easy skip or perform tedious tasks. I would've paid real money to skip it. Like many Borderlands bits, it's a joke that could've been a two-minute gag extended to ten times that. The bulk of Borderlands 3 reads like teenage lunch table improv circa Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me.

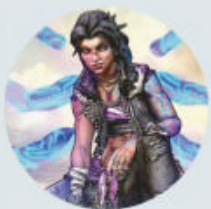
Worse, there's no way to skip through the dialogue. Quests lurch into motion like starting up an old car: listen to an NPC talk for 30 seconds, press a button as if twisting the ignition, more talking, more heaving of the engine, pick up an object, more talking, spit, putter, and now the objective location is revealed. And we're off.

I even encounter a handful of scripting bugs where bits of dialogue

WHO'S WHO? Meet the new Vault Hunters



FL4K
Commands a monstrous pet, ideal solo class.



AMARA
Summons ethereal arms, great elemental class.

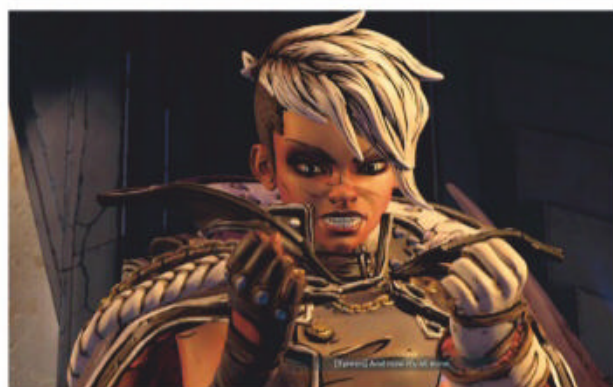


ZANE
Can equip two Action Skills. Versatile!

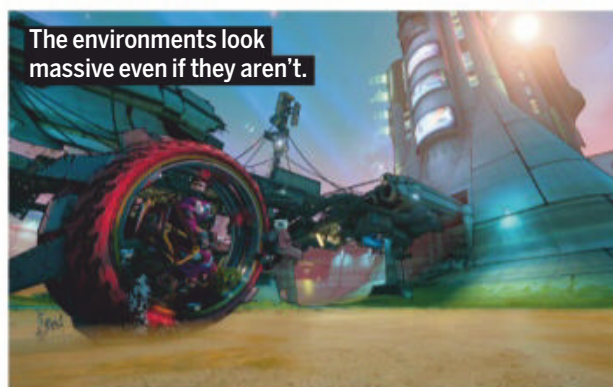


MOZE
Summons a big mech, the go-to DPS class.

Meet Penny, my large irradiated Skag.



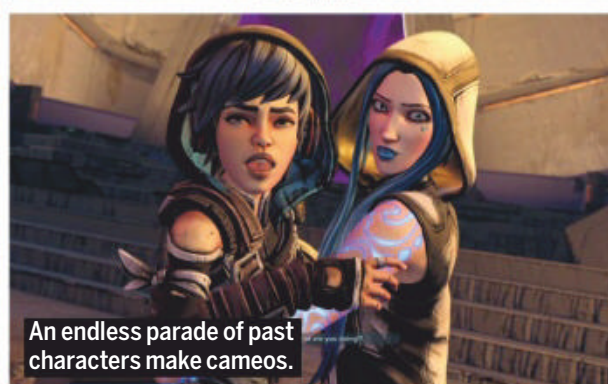
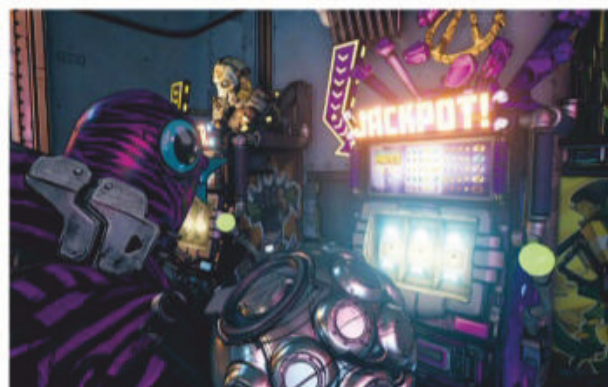
The environments look massive even if they aren't.



Bandits are back, largely unchanged.



Eden-6 is a wet, stinky planet.

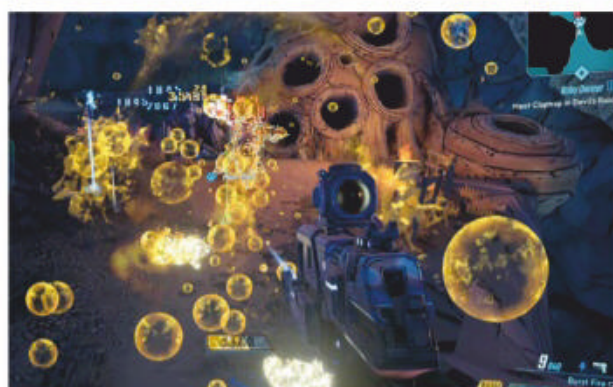


An endless parade of past characters make cameos.

Damage numbers, damage numbers everywhere!

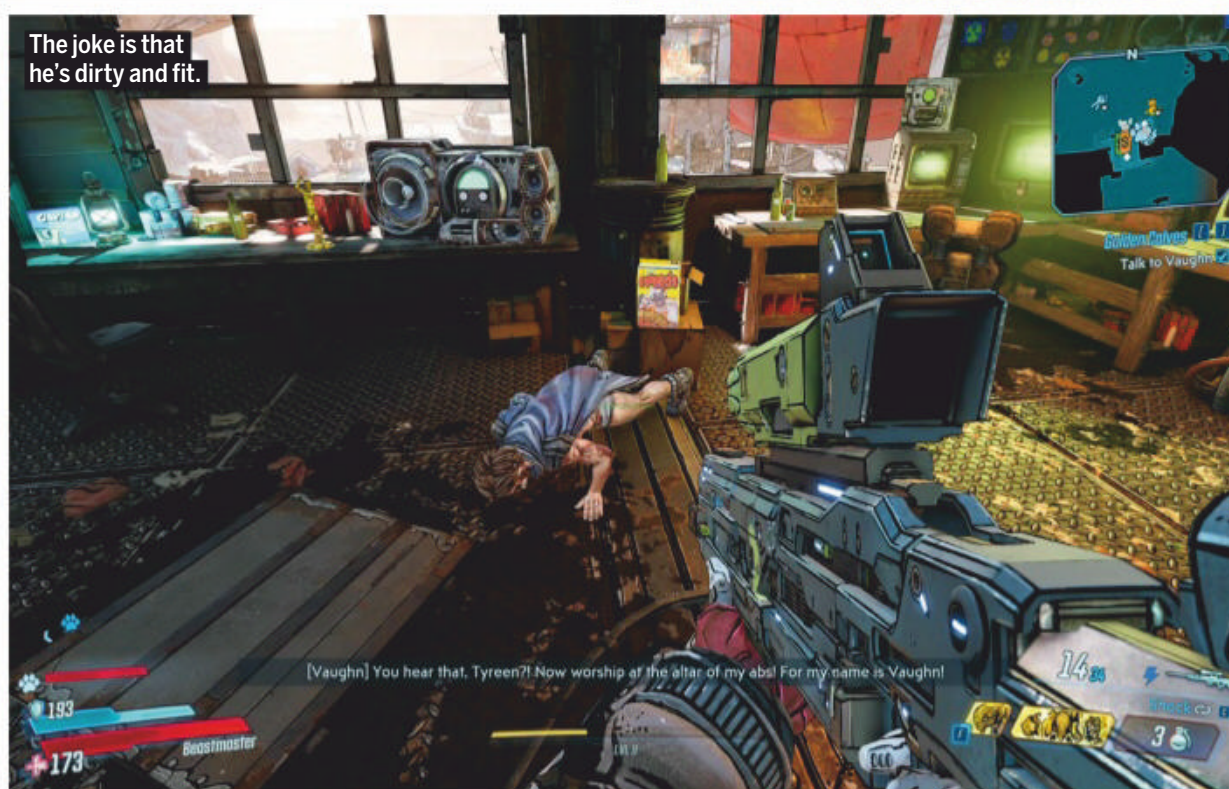


Borderlands 3 does nice things with colour.



A small field trip to space is a low-grav highlight.

The joke is that he's dirty and fit.



Trials are repeatable endgame gauntlets.



» repeated endlessly and quests became impossible to complete without restarting the game. You can't see markers for multiple quests at the same time, even.

The inventory *Borderlands 3* system is largely unchanged. *Borderlands 3* is a bundle of aged design and frustrating inefficiencies.

SHOOTIN' AND LOOTIN'

The new locations are a welcome change of scenery from the muted deserts of Pandora. Eden-6 is your typical swampy jungle, where dinos and poo-tossing jabbers chase me around the swamps and through the treetops. Promethea is a slick corporate dystopia composed of uniformly branded architecture and bright neon lighting.

Each location has its own enemy types, though in practice there's not much difference between fighting a swarm of COV soldiers or a swarm of bandits. *Borderlands 3* usually tests players with a mess of enemies in open, multi-tiered arenas, more of a war of attrition than a tactical puzzle.

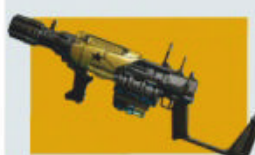
Besides a few tough bosses, the true challenge comes from deciding whether to shelve a badass electro-pistol that basically works like a super shotgun or a fiery SMG that shoots a heart-shaped bullet spray for a plain weapon with an elemental affinity better suited to a region's enemies.

I soon tire of repeatedly killing my darlings (fun guns) for lesser darlings (boring guns which are technically better for the situation). Trying new weapons is part of *Borderlands'* appeal, but there can be huge droughts between the truly good ones until the endgame.

My favourite shotgun chains electric damage to all nearby enemies, deleting the room's shields and dissolving handfuls of weaker enemies at once. Jakobs sniper rifles are ornate, gilded works of art, less playful but extremely lethal. I find a legendary that, if I land a headshot, will ricochet and pop another guy's head in the room.

The view-models are gorgeous too, ranging from chunky, volatile machinery to flawless future tech. Guns whirl and spin and little pieces kick around as they fire, some smoke, some sigh, and some whine like a VCR mid-rewind. I've yet to tire of

BLAST 'EM Our favourite guns so far



THE BORING GUN
TORQUE
SHOTGUN
Fires exploding saw blades.



BRAINSTORMER
HYPERION
SHOTGUN
Chains shock damage between nearby enemies.



STARK STORM
MALIWAN
SNIPER
Spawns damaging shock orbs above enemies you shoot.



LOV3M4CH1N3
HYPERION
SMG
Bonkers incendiary damage, fires in heart-shaped pattern. Lovely.



CONFERENCE CALL
HYPERION
SHOTGUN
Every fired pellet fires its own pellets.

watching loot rain down from defeated enemies, the signal light for something I haven't seen before. Wild gear is the reason to play *Borderlands 3*, and the guns are its fervently beating heart.

It's better with friends, of course, though the extra enemies and explosions run counter to the shooting refinements. With so much visual noise against a mess of flat colours and thick lines, I often can't see what I'm pointing at, making well-aimed critical shots an act of faith rather than intent and skill.

Enemies react better to getting shot and now we can crouch-slide and ground pound and the guns look and feel much more like actual machines instead of cardboard DPS

dispensers – and yet, combat still devolves into the same rhythms as the previous games. Enemies are too dumb and spongy to force tactical play. The most reliable plan is to jump around, throw all the grenades, shoot

whatever moves, and use my Action Skill as soon as it recharges. It's fun, sure, but in a very mindless way.

Borderlands 3's new vault hunters don't break much new ground. While they each have three diverse skill trees and accompanying Action Skills perfect for squads looking to complement one another, there's nothing in the combat that requires close cooperation between classes as of yet, despite the inclusion of some context-sensitive ping tools.

I spend the most time as FL4K, a robot with a pet companion, a great option for solo players. My build turns my Skag into a nightmare. Wherever he spawns there's a radioactive explosion. Goons explode like bloody pustules in his wake, limbs whirling around a

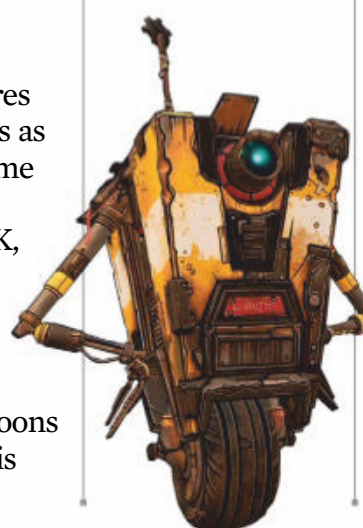
singularity while I fire rockets and toss grenades into the mess. This is what I love about *Borderlands*. It's sad I have to find it beneath a thick sediment of poo jokes.

I do this for around 30 hours, the repetitive action propped up by an endless font of cool stuff with ridiculous attributes. If *Destiny 2's* guardians are architectural blueprints with structure and purpose, *Borderlands 3's* skill trees produce Jackson Pollock vault hunters where disorder is the point.

Once I finish the campaign, sweep up the majority of side quests, and hit the level cap, I settle into a comfortable routine and remember why I have hundreds of hours logged in *Borderlands 2*. The clouds of red mist and particle effects return, the numbers grow, and so too does my heart. The endgame has arrived.

But it's just too shallow at launch. Mayhem mode incrementally increases difficulty for better rewards with three levels to work through. The alternative is True Vault Hunter Mode, which kicks off a new campaign with all your loot and abilities in tow. That's good in theory, however, I know I just never want to play the campaign again.

Between the bugs, the extended non-jokes, the self-aggrandising jabs at game design trends, and a few groan-worthy cameos, *Borderlands 3* has a lot in common with Gearbox fan events as of late. An excess of loud, extended posturing holding what everyone really came for hostage. It's a shame, because a better *Borderlands* is actually possible, but it's just not *Borderlands 3*. ■



PC GAMER VERDICT

Borderlands 3 is an endless font of bad jokes and cool guns in the series' most vapid story yet.

63

WITCH, DOCTORED

BLAIR WITCH struggles to find new scares in an old idea. *By Alex Spencer*

Horror cinema is blessed with tons of visually iconic monsters: the Xenomorph, the Thing, the Brundlefly. And then there's the Blair Witch. Never so much as a blur on screen, at least in the one film that counts, she exists only in the sounds of a branch snapping in the distance. The one visual we have is a stand-in, those little twig effigies which *Blair Witch* – the videogame, sans 'Project' – distributes liberally through its woods.

It's an inevitability, perhaps, of adapting this source material into a game, of having to find new verbs in a story where the lead characters mostly just get lost, argue and scream – but to its credit, *Blair Witch* resists many of the obvious traps. The game keeps the UI and the explanations to a minimum, it's never tempted to hand you a gun to defend yourself, and it waits a good long time before any monsters do appear.

At the outset, you're just Ellis, an ex-cop deciding to join a search party for a kid who got lost in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland. It's 1996, a couple of years after the events of *The Blair Witch Project*, and characters allude to those film students who went missing, but the game keeps a light touch.

It doesn't need to say much more, because the woods themselves make it clear that something's not right. There's a moment in the movie where one of the lost film students admits to kicking the map into a creek because it was useless – and

this, at least, the game adapts incredibly faithfully. There are moments I'm not sure if I've gone the wrong way, or if the game has reworked its level geometry while I wasn't looking. And gradually, as Ellis

pushes deeper into the woods, things start to appear that definitely shouldn't be there.

Ellis fails to find the rest of the search party, naturally, but he isn't alone. You're accompanied at all times by Bullet, a

German shepherd who will surely be remembered as this game's breakout star. Bullet is a Good Dog, but he's also a good dog – one brought to convincing life thanks to a wealth of incidental animations. He'll stop to scratch at one ear, or stiffen as he relieves himself on a patch of grass.

Yes, *Blair Witch* meets that most important of modern videogame metrics: you can pet the dog. In fact, there's an entire wheel of commands you can give to Bullet. If you lose sight of him, tap the button to call him back, and he'll immediately canter over to you. Hold it, and you

You might not have a gun, but you do have the flickering beam of your torch

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A sort-of sequel to the 1999 found footage horror classic, with added dog

EXPECT TO PAY
£24.99

DEVELOPER
Bloober Team

PUBLISHER
Bloober Team

REVIEWED ON
Radeon RX 580, AMD Ryzen 5 2600 3.9GHz, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
blairwitchgame.com

can tell him to stay, or sniff out a clue. There's even a 'reprimand' option on there, though I have no idea what it does. I'm not the monster here. No, the real monster is those spindly-limbed creatures that keep popping up behind the trees.

WITCH HUNT

At first you just catch glimpses. A blur of movement, something that could be an arm or could be a branch. The kind of thing you see at the edge of your vision when you haven't been sleeping properly. It's unsettling, if not outright scary.

But then the game forces you into what can only be described – with a reluctant sigh – as combat encounters. You might not have a gun, but you do have the flickering beam of your torch. You desperately scan the woods trying to catch the creature like a rabbit in a single wavering headlight. It's tense the first time you do it, but it's not very mechanically robust or well explained. Which, at least in my case, meant dying twice the very first time it happens. Which turns the threat into something definable – just another videogame enemy to defeat.

The same goes for the other main type of monster, something seen only by the cloud of leaves it throws up from the undergrowth. It's an evocative sight – until you've had to sprint through a field with a dozen of them in, dashing from one bit of contrived cover to the next.

These threats are enclosed to certain spaces, meaning that getting lost in the woods stops being scary as you never feel pursued. For a game of this length, keeping the monster off-screen was never really going to be an option, but *Blair Witch* fails to find a convincing alternative. ■

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The '90s tech Ellis brings along into the woods



KNOCK-OFF NOKIA

Complete with *Snake* and a history of calls to the pizza shop.



CAMCORDER

Not just for watching recordings of murders – it can help solve puzzles.



WALKIE TALKIE

For chatting to police captains and unhinged forest residents on.



TAMAGOTCHI

Haunted, with a virtual pet which suddenly disappears. OK, we made this one up.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An interesting horror game that never manages to escape the shadow of its '90s inspiration.

58

If you go down in the woods today....



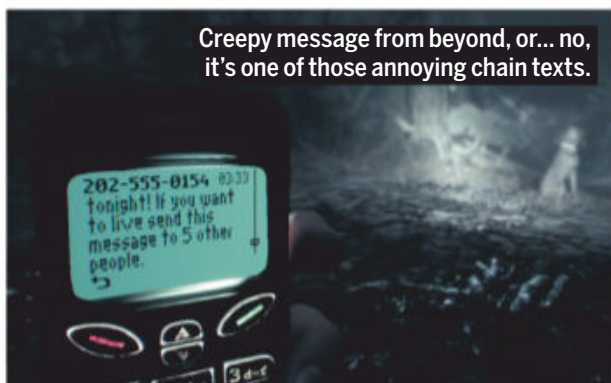
Ahh, a cabin in the woods. Surely I'll be safe in here.



It's raining men. Er... hallelujah?



Creepy message from beyond, or... no, it's one of those annoying chain texts.



Blair Witch features both walking and talking. It's a walkie-talkie.

TAKE A GANDER

Renegade Shepard's got nothing on you in
UNTITLED GOOSE GAME. By Luke Kemp

There aren't nearly enough games that let you play the villain. The beauty here is that, as much as it might feel like it on occasion, geese are not evil creatures. They're just birds adapting to a world that humans have taken over with a cold disregard for nature. I, on the other hand, take immense pleasure in being a horrible git and therefore, I love this game. I adore fowl behaviour (such as that utterly disgraceful pun).

Controls are simple, never getting in the way of your desire to wreak havoc. Hold one button to run rather than waddle, one to lean down, another to flap your wings, another to grab or drop things – and that's it, really. Objectives are presented via a 'to do' list in the pause menu, and almost exclusively involve making the lives of the villagers miserable. Although you're free to live out your goose-related fantasies however you see fit, these objectives serve to both guide you around what's possible, and help unlock the entirety of the small but busy map.

The game begins just outside a small garden and, once I'm in, I'm giggling with glee within seconds. Now, I've already decided I like the game before playing – the waddling animation is endlessly captivating, and it is literally impossible to dislike a game that opens with "press X to honk" – but my first human encounter really seals the deal.

One of the first objectives I complete is to steal the gardener's keys, snatching them right off his trousers. I then make a run for the

lake, honking triumphantly as he gives chase, dropping them into my watery domain far out of his reach before smugly paddling around without a care in the world. Later I'll get the sod wet, steal his lunch, make him buy back his own trowel, and more. This, I'll remind you, is the first area of the village.

I'll get the sod wet, steal his lunch, make him buy back his own trowel

The best way to explain the sheer joy to be had from *Untitled Goose Game*, I think, is to talk about the boy. Every villager stands up to your ruthless antics – chasing you if they catch you stealing, a few even determinedly shooing you away before you've had a chance to do anything – except this boy. The poor lad in question is terrified of you, which shouldn't be funny at all, but is absolutely hilarious. He runs away when you chase him with menacing honks, which is funny enough (not to mention the fact that you can untie his shoelaces and make him fall over), but he also serves as a demonstration of the game's action-puzzle chops.

One objective is to trap the kid in a phone box. With this done, he calls the owner of the nearby TV shop, who comes out to help. This allows

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A goose simulator, casting you as one of the feathered fiends tearing through a human village

EXPECT TO PAY

£16

DEVELOPER

House House

PUBLISHER

Panic

REVIEWED ON

GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

goose.game

you to quickly nip into the shop and complete another objective. Progress, you see, often relies on outsmarting those pesky humans. Better yet, many objectives have multiple solutions.

HONKY DORY

There's not a story, exactly, but there is an ending. Your first run through will probably only take an hour or two, after which some extra objectives for each area are added to your 'to do' list. Clear all those, and things still aren't quite over yet. You can, of course, waddle around causing random havoc just for the hell of it, and dig out Easter eggs (I take far more pleasure than is perhaps normal in honking through a walkie talkie). If it's structure you're after, then it now almost becomes a whole new game.

Once the whole village is open to you, each area presents the optional challenge of completing all its objectives within a tight time limit. This requires forward planning and, sometimes, a change in tactics if the way you usually do things is too time consuming. A game that is normally relaxed and playful suddenly becomes a manic test of speed and improvisation. This isn't a bad thing by any means – beating a time limit induces wing-pumping joy.

There's no denying that once you approach the six hour mark, the joke (slowly) begins to wear thin, the small size of the village meaning you'll have repeated yourself a lot. But that really doesn't matter. This wasn't designed for *GTA* levels of playtime, and I can't remember the last game that made me laugh so often while I was playing it. It's the sort of game that makes your friends, when they see you playing it, say "goose a go, mate". ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Hilarious, bursting with charm, and satisfying to play. *Untitled Goose Game* is a winger.

80

BIRD WATCHING *Some of the more memorable villagers*



THE LADIES

The only people you entertain rather than annoy.



THE DELIVERY DRIVER

Trick her into 'delivering' you then... surprise!



THE SHOPKEEPER

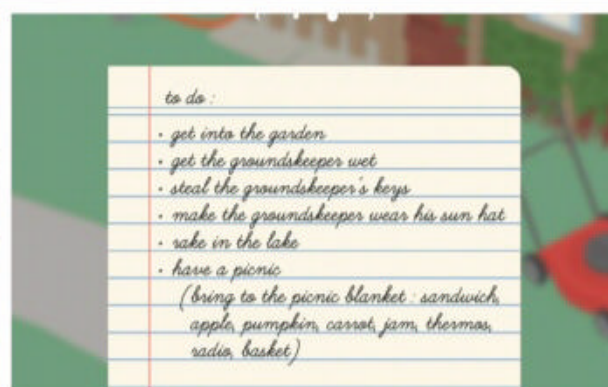
Damn you, and damn your infernal broom!



It's my garden now!



HONK [This phone box will be your coffin]



to do:

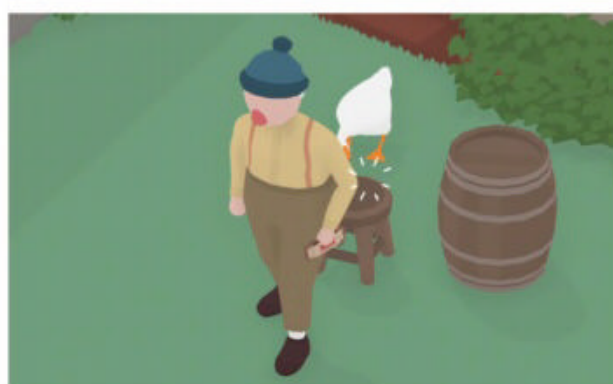
- get into the garden
- get the groundskeeper wet
- steal the groundskeeper's keys
- make the groundskeeper wear his sun hat
- rake in the lake
- have a picnic
(bring to the picnic blanket: sandwich, apple, pumpkin, carrot, jam, thomas, radio, basket)



Bucket on the head. Classic!



Don't slipper up, or he'll catch you.



A model village, sadly, rather than a cheat code. *Untitled Goose DLC?*

FENIX RISING

Three years after the last instalment, **GEARS 5** finds a new voice amidst time-honoured mechanics. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

A combat droid called Jack and some pithy one liners. For all the spectacle, all the bluster, all the carefully orchestrated standoffs with stratospherically proportioned enemies, those are the scant bits of *Gears 5* that stick around in the memory when the dust settles. It's a funny kind of game. It sweeps you up in the moment, but the enjoyment it delivers is always surface level.

Traditionally it's been a series in which you were never totally sure if you were laughing along with the characters and dialogue, or just laughing at them. Marcus Fenix, protagonist in the original trilogy, wore an unironic soul patch and shoulder pads more spacious than most London flats. The man carried a chainsaw bayonet into battle. And yet neither he nor his fellow cast members broke character and acknowledged the essential absurdity of the *Gears* universe over many hours of hyper-macho world-saving.

There was an embryonic sense of self-awareness in *Gears 4*, but the tone's notably different here. Protagonist Kait – although the term's loose, since you can also choose to play as Del, JD, or Jack in campaign mode – and those around her seem more willing to point out the ridiculous this time.

Don't get me wrong, this is still very much a game in which people say things like "The truth is, you two are more similar than either of you

wants to admit" in cutscenes and "Nice of you to stop by!" when you arrive at an already blazing firefight. It's broad writing to underpin broad action. But there's a levity, a cocked eyebrow at the more preposterous elements, which wasn't there before.

It's even capable of fleeting moments of sensitivity and political complexity. This isn't to say *Gears* has suddenly become a great literary work, but it has made a partially successful effort to strike a more

sophisticated tone this time.

None of that would count for much if the fundamentals of its tried-and-tested cover shooting formula weren't so enjoyable, six games on. The *Metal Slug*-style active reload, which gives your weapon a boost when you time your reload perfectly, still excites on a primal level, adding an extra wrinkle and a chance to feel adept where most games are happy to have you sit passively and do the reloading for you. Familiar, yes, but fun.

What stops the fatigue from setting in is, as ever, *Gears'* knack for

This is the most sophisticated and involving Gears title so far

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The OG of cover-shooting, now with a robot friend

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
The Coalition

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
i5 6500, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 5 (co-op, Up to 10 (multiplayer)

LINK
www.gears5.com

throwing you into Hollywood set-pieces with just the right regularity. It knows when to let you you bask in the perfectly teed-up moment where you only need squeeze the trigger to save the day in a confetti cloud of bombast. And the answer, obviously, is: often.

As for what's changed in that winning mechanical formula, it's all manifested in Jack. A surprisingly endearing support droid, he's there to revive downed party members, flashbang enemies, collect ammo and ping enemies. He even has a skill tree.

JACKED UP

This is the most sophisticated and involving *Gears* title so far. And yet it still somehow feels lacking in substance, as though once you put down the controller there's very little about it that left an imprint. It's the kind of game that occupies you in the moment, but never pops into your head when people start talking about the best games of the year. Or, indeed, at all after you hit 'Quit Game'.

That boils down to two distinct facets of *Gears 5*: one, that the writing might offer more subtlety and humour than before, but still feels clichéd next to its contemporaries. And two: although there are new elements to the *Gears* formula, they're not new to the player. We've been scrutinising upgrade trees and firing off specials for aeons now. It's enough to reinvigorate a long-running series, but not enough to capture the imagination.

Which means *Gears 5* is what *Gears* has always been: deeply capable, eminently enjoyable and occasionally spectacular. The big difference this time around is that you know you're laughing along with the script, not at it. ■

GEAR EYE *Four characters in dire need of makeovers*



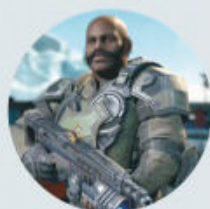
DEL

The bandana's doing nothing for you, mate. Discard.



FAHZ

Overly sculpted beard, sunnies, mohawk. In the bin.



KEEGAN

Handlebars shouldn't meet your hairline. Get a razor.



MAC

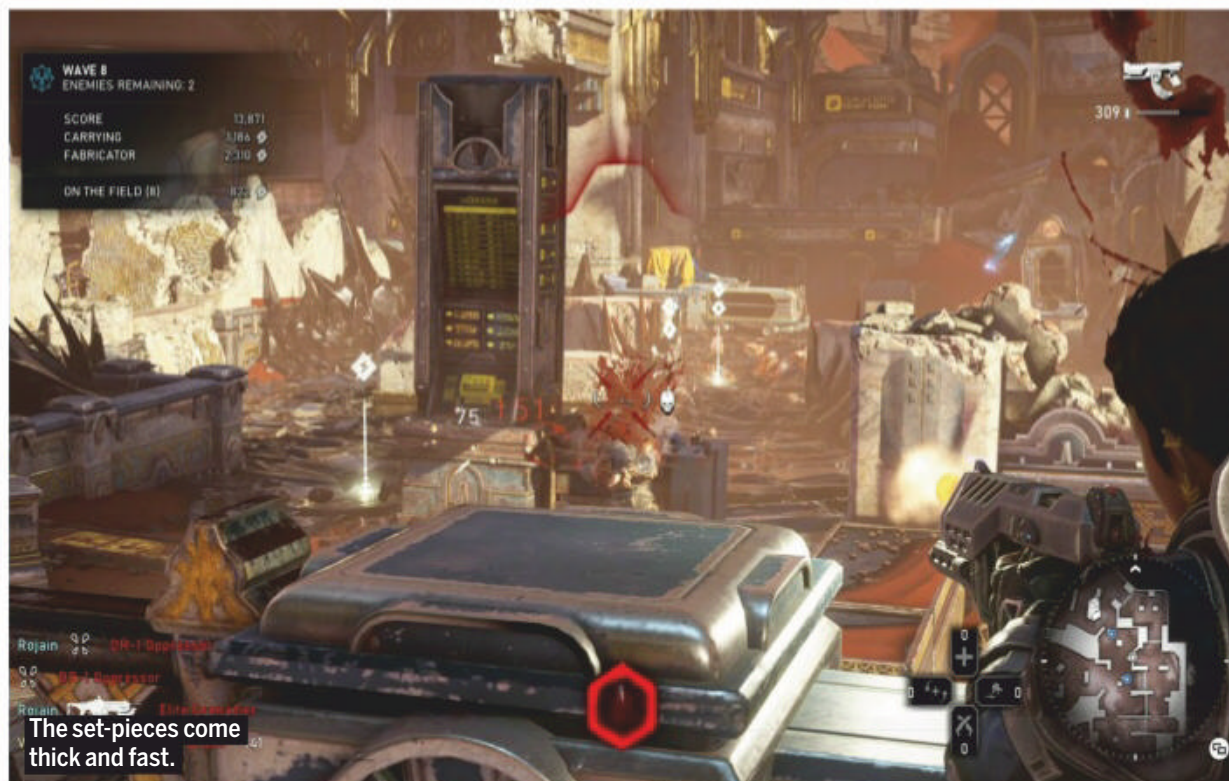
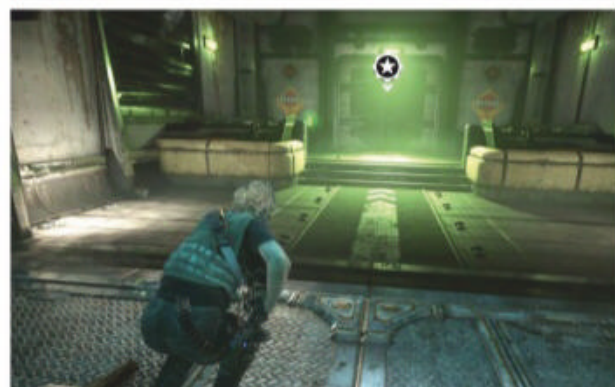
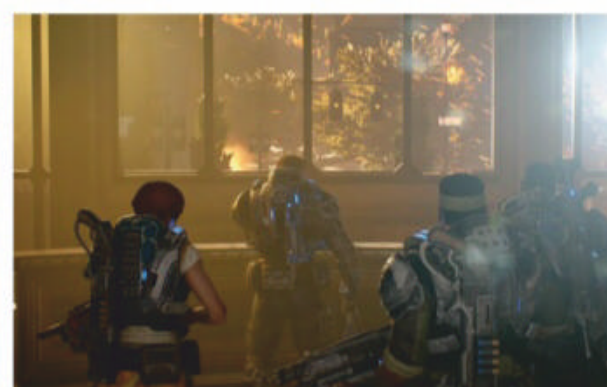
Braided ponytail, infected forearm tattoo. Ugh.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A polished campaign married to stalwart PvE and PvP modes refine, rather than revolutionise, the *Gears* experience.

78



A SOLID SCRAP

Strap on some industrial hardware and make limbs fly in **THE SURGE 2**. *By Robert Zak*

Deck13 is nothing if not tireless. Back in 2014, the studio made *Lords of the Fallen*, a pretty but derivative Soulslike that was perhaps too in awe of From Software's source material to seriously forge its own identity. But with *The Surge* a couple of years later, Deck13 was onto something, introducing crunchy dismemberment mechanics and propelling the setting into an industrial sci-fi future reminiscent of a longshoreman's waking nightmare.

With *The Surge 2*, Deck13's five-year grind in that formula of tough, stamina-based combat, corpse runs and shortcuts takes another thudding step towards self-actualisation. From the sound of metal on bone as you cleave enemies in half with hulking weapons, to the joy of a perfect parry, *The Surge 2* is a satisfying, action-RPG that Deck13 can really call its own.

The action is set in Jericho City, a futuristic metallic metropolis that's been beset by The Defrag, a maddening illness caused by a substance called nanite which humans foolishly tried to harness through the usual MacGuffin of Bad Science. You're an anonymous schmoe with a tacked-on backstory whose plane crashes into the middle of this mess, following cyber-spectral visions of a young girl who has something to do with it.

But from more or less the moment I lop off my first enemy limb, any obligation I have to care for the story

or its characters makes way for the far more immediate satisfaction of combat and character progression. Much like its predecessor, combat in *The Surge 2* is based around observation, stamina management and timing. Watch your enemies' attack patterns, target specific body parts for weaknesses, then use those body parts to craft modular gear for your avatar. It's a very satisfying loop.

You can be a, immovable brute who looks like a Transformer

The panoply of armour and weaponry means that there's plenty of versatility within this system. You can be a hulking, immovable brute who looks like a junkyard Transformer, winding up lumbering jackhammer swings to scatter enemies picking at you. Or perhaps you'd rather be a fleet-footed dodger, leaping in with balletic spear strikes before breaking your combo to leap away again.

XP comes in the form of tech scrap, which you use to upgrade or construct equipment, or to level up

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Soulslike action-RPG set in the ruins of a futuristic industrial city

EXPECT TO PAY
£44

DEVELOPER
Deck13 Interactive

PUBLISHER
Focus Home Interactive

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1070, i7-6700HQ, 16GB RAM, SSD

MULTIPLAYER
Yes (Limited)

LINK
thesurge-game.com

and upgrade your health, stamina and battery efficiency (used to execute finishing moves and use boosts called Injectors). Battery power is earned by attacking enemies, so in order to heal yourself or gain short-term boosts you need to be aggressive.

A FLYING SPARK

The weapons – ranging from clanging electric-charged gauntlets to angular chunks of metal that look like spare crane parts – are so brash and brawny that you want to play around with all of them, and the game does a good job of pushing you to do so by confronting you with a solid variety of enemy types with different attack patterns and weaknesses. There will be a little bit of farming required to gather the necessary pieces for new armour and weapon upgrades, but it's a fair price to pay for changing up your playstyle mid-game.

The implant system feeds into this malleability. As you level up, you gain extra slots to fill with implants that either boost certain stats or grant you Injectors, which use your battery cells to replenish health or offer small stat bonuses in damage, defence and so on. These implants can stack in interesting ways, granting you energy for taking damage for example, or giving you multiple boosts for successful parries. You can chop-and-change them at any time, helping you really refine your build and playstyle.

As with the original game, you can target-lock each of an enemy's individual limbs, aiming for unarmoured parts for quicker kills, or for armoured parts if you want to gain metal alloys used for crafting armour. How likely you are to hit a given limb depends on whether you use vertical or horizontal swings, and once you've worn a limb down enough you can carry out a slow-mo finishing move that dismembers it.

Even after executing these finishers hundreds of times, the variety of animations for each weapon and elegant flow between combat and finisher means it never gets old.

MULTIPLAYER INTERACTIONS

New additions to The Surge 2



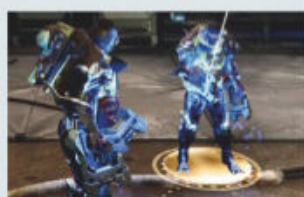
GRAFFITI

Use your graffiti drone to leave symbols around for other players, pointing to hidden loot and more.



REVENGE ENEMIES

Certain enemies, upon killing other players, appear in your game in more powerful form.



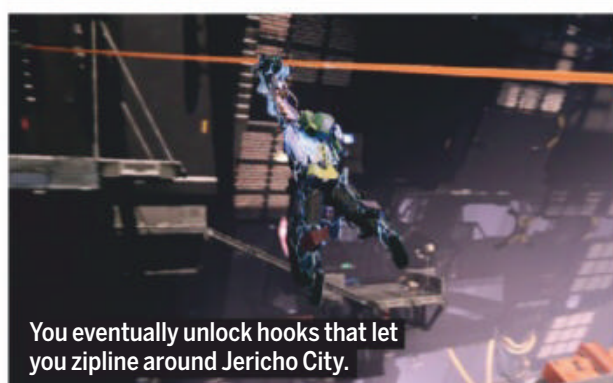
BANNERS

Leave banners in hidden places for other players to stumble upon, then you can claim a reward.

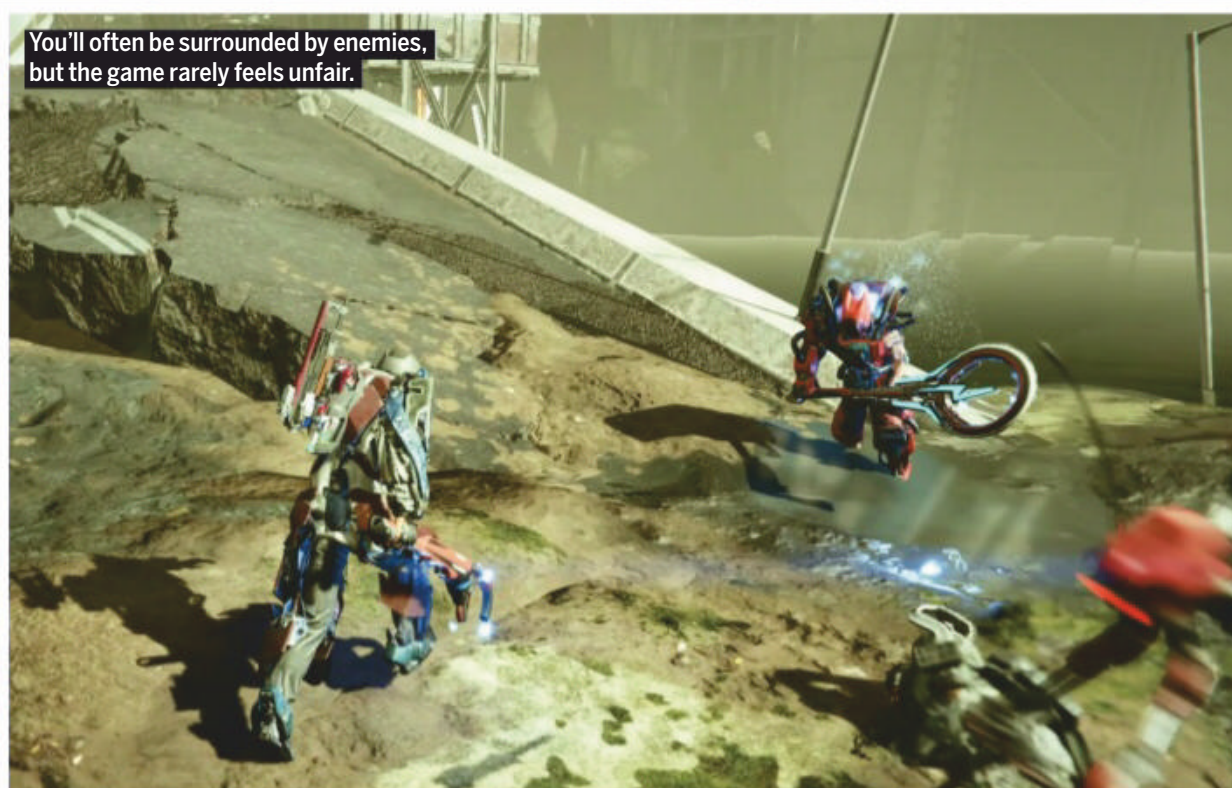
The non-combat hubs offer respite, traders and NPC chit-chat.



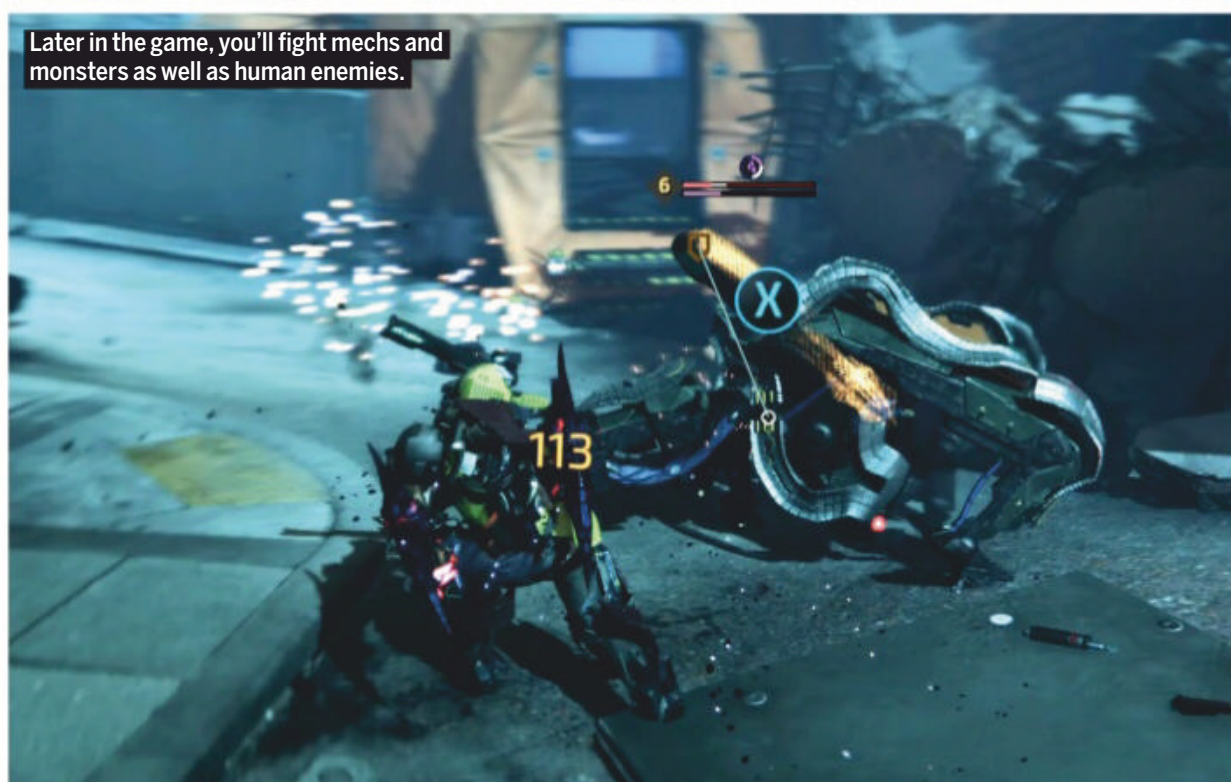
You eventually unlock hooks that let you zipline around Jericho City.



You'll often be surrounded by enemies, but the game rarely feels unfair.



Later in the game, you'll fight mechs and monsters as well as human enemies.

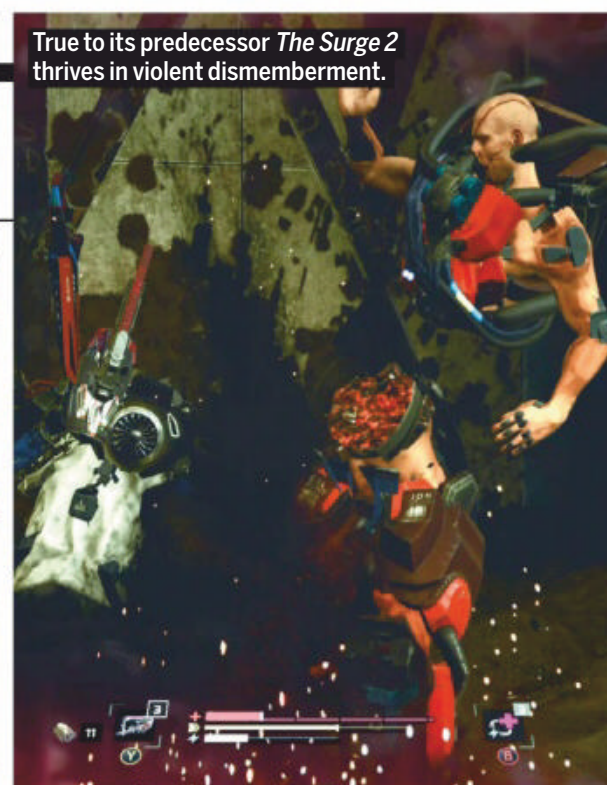


There are quite a few moments of explosive spectacle in *The Surge 2*.

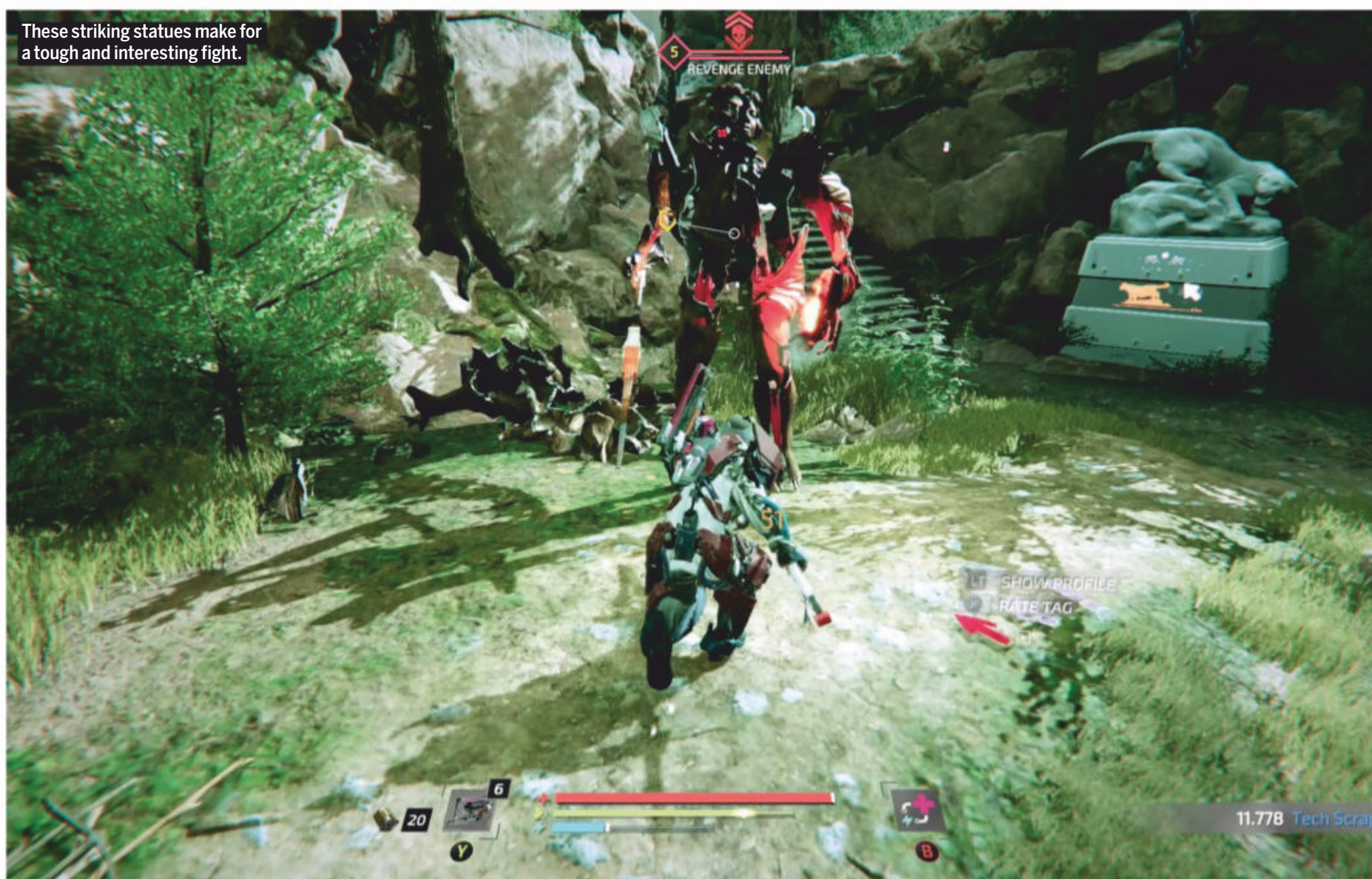




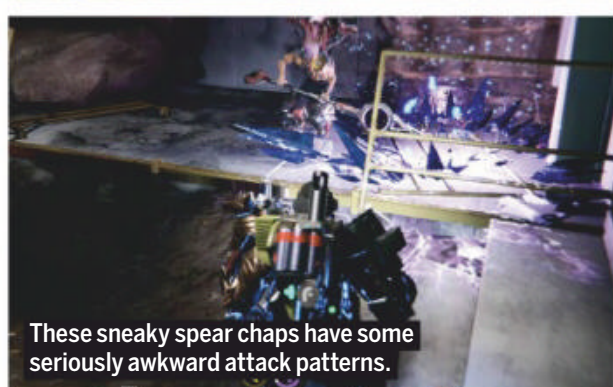
Punish clustered enemies by lobbing a grenade at them.



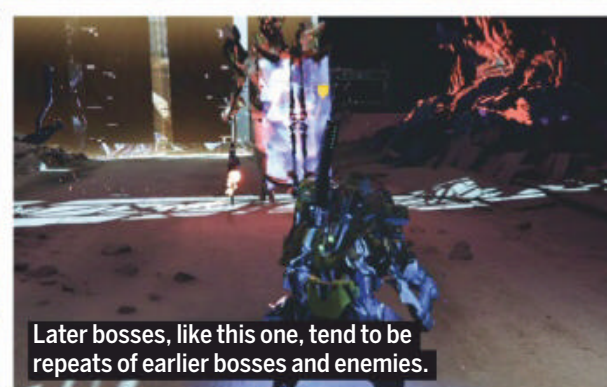
True to its predecessor *The Surge 2* thrives in violent dismemberment.



These striking statues make for a tough and interesting fight.



These sneaky spear chaps have some seriously awkward attack patterns.



Later bosses, like this one, tend to be repeats of earlier bosses and enemies.

» Taking out a tricky enemy by kicking their head clean off or halving them at the waist with a buzzsaw has been one of the most cathartic gaming mechanics of 2019 for me.

There's nuance to the combat too. The game cleverly disincentivises panicked button-mashing by preserving your stamina if you time your strikes properly, and there's now a well-implemented directional parrying system which can leave enemies open for counter-attacks.

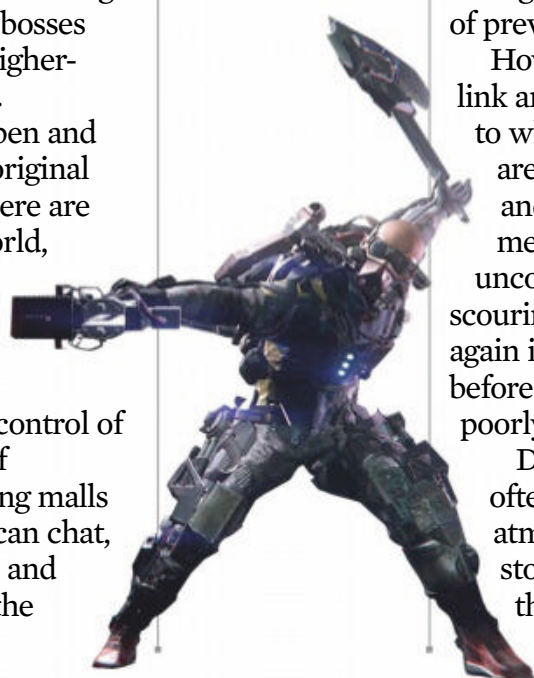
HEAVY METAL

The Surge 2 punishes complacency, hastiness and hesitation. Particularly in the early going, there's not a lot of leeway for error as enemy blows can easily stagger you, and an over-reliance on blocking or frantic attacking will leave you short of stamina and vulnerable.

But the difficulty curve is an uneven one. My early forays into the docklands area of Port Nixon and later the verdant artificial wilderness of Gideon's Rock lead to dozens of deaths and poundings of my gamepad against the nearest soft surface as new enemy types force serious shifts in my combat approach. Later on however the way I distribute my stats and implants – overwhelmingly focused around battery efficiency, energy replenishment and health injectors – makes me virtually unstoppable by the time I reach the final third of the game, draining much of the mid-game momentum.

Early boss encounters are the right kind of gruelling, resulting in a healthy amount of deaths, expletives and subsequent mastery on my part. But by the latter stages I'm ploughing through most bosses first time – no doubt helped by my plucky levelling and the fact that most later bosses are somewhat uninspired higher-level repeats of earlier ones.

Jericho City is a more open and sprawling setting than the original game's factory complex. There are several vast zones in the world, housing all kinds of secrets, shortcuts and bifurcating routes. It's more lived-in too, with different factions vying for control of the streets while enclaves of humanity hunker in shopping malls and nightclubs, where you can chat, pick up quests, trade goods, and listen to local gossip about the surrounding apocalypse.



DIFFICULTY SURGES

The Surge 2 has a strange difficulty flow



Within Jericho City, the *Souls* bonfire is replaced by Medbays – sporadic save points where you trade your gathered scrap for upgrades and level up in exchange for enemies in the area respawning. When you die, you drop all your unspent tech scrap, and need to return to that spot without dying in order to retrieve it.

It's a reliably suspenseful system, and in *The Surge 2* it never veers into the unfair. An interesting twist that Deck13 has been refining in its games is a time limit for retrieving your scrap, which can be extended by killing enemies. Your scrap pile also heals you when you're near it, making it a high-stakes tactical aid in situations like boss fights.

SHORT CUTS

The Surge 2 satiates that itch to open hidden passages connecting back to earlier areas, and items like zipline hooks and charged nano attacks evoke that *Metroidvania* feel by letting you return to locked-off parts of previously visited areas.

However, many of the shortcuts link areas that often aren't relevant to where you're going, and many areas feel so visually muddled and indistinct that it's hard to memorise every shortcut you uncover. Too often I find myself scouring the same area over and over again in search of where to go next, before eventually stumbling upon the poorly signposted critical path.

Deck13's previous games were often wanting in the ways of atmosphere, art direction and story, all of which tended towards the generic. True to form, Jericho City isn't a place that

absorbs and envelopes with its mysteries. Sidequests are busywork rather than intriguing narrative rabbit-holes, and the deeper you go into the game the more funnelled it feels, pushing you towards its story conclusion rather than beckoning you down uncharted or optional paths.

There's a nice sense of urban chaos in Jericho City, as snipers plip you from the ruins and ambush squads lie in wait while lurid neon signs sardonically tout the erstwhile utopianism of the city, but it's a world lacking in personality.

By not grasping the subtleties of level design or world-building, *The*

Surge 2 lacks that enigmatic magic that elevates From Software's catalogue to masterpieces. But it's kind of fitting that a game so industrial in its theming eschews more artful qualities in favour of the

mechanical. In its combat *The Surge 2* attains a level of mastery right up there with the best action games.

The steely smash-and-crunch of the combat merrily pushes me through its 20-hour campaign and beyond into New Game+, compelling me to ignore the rudimentary world and focus on those glorious moments where sparks fly with abandon.

Deck13 has come a long way, welding together a solid *Soulslike* that showcases just what it is that makes this genre special. ■

***The Surge 2*
satiates that
itch to open
hidden
passages**

PC GAMER VERDICT

The Surge 2 is a worthy sequel that ratchets up the scale and refines the combat of its predecessor.

79

LOST IN SPACE

CRYING SUNS is a strong space adventure – but flies in the shadow of *FTL*. *By Steven Messner*

Crying Suns is both a good strategy game and a bad roguelike. It walks and talks like *FTL*, the indie hit that directly inspired it, but ultimately fails to mimic the endless replayability and daunting challenge that makes *FTL* so enchanting. Don't get me wrong, though, *Crying Suns* is still a good game – thanks largely to its surprisingly human story and frantic space combat. It just isn't the spiritual successor that it wants to be.

Like *FTL*, I captain a spaceship through a randomly generated gauntlet of solar systems trying to keep my crew alive while navigating increasingly difficult encounters with the local populous. But where *FTL* gave these decisions as little narrative dressing as possible, *Crying Suns* creates a grim and vivid world that tees up an ambitious story.

I play a clone of an intergalactic admiral, Ellys Idaho, who wakes in a mysterious cloning facility decades after the empire he once helped rule collapsed into chaos. Idaho's rebirth is part of a grand plan to save the empire, and it's my mission to set out in a battleship and discover what happened and why. *Crying Suns*' setting is fun to discover because it's so meticulously thought out and grandiose. Transcendent robo-gods and 800-year-old emperors juxtaposed with an intimate tale of friendship and betrayal make for genuinely a good science fiction plot.

Layers of this world are revealed through random encounters that happen as I travel from one solar system to the next. Each beat involves a decision that will either reward resources to upgrade my ship

or leave me in a significantly worse for wear. Early on I encounter a group of religious child refugees who I agree to shelter on my ship. They turn out to be fanatical kamikaze terrorists.

There's dozens of these scenarios brought to life by vivid writing and *Crying Suns*' crisp pseudo-pixel art, but it's annoying how repetitive these events become over the course of the campaign. By the time I see the credits roll, I must've encountered those exploding kids, and other similar events, dozens of times. What's worse is that many events only have one set outcome, so once I know the right choice all the mystery and tension is gone.

That's endemic of a larger problem with *Crying Suns* and why it

I must've encountered those exploding kids dozens of times

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An *FTL*-inspired roguelike with a lot of story

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Alt Shift

PUBLISHER
Humble Bundle

REVIEWED ON
i7 7700, RTX 2070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
cryingsuns.com

ultimately fails to be a good roguelike even if it's still a fun game.

COOL YOUR JETS

Combat, for example, plays out on a grid flanked by my and the enemy battleship. Between volleys from our main weapon systems, squadrons of fighters take the field to battle one another in a constant ebb and flow that's chaotic and tense. Managing cooldown timers is key, so if I throw everything I have at the enemy ship in an all-out assault and don't finish it off, I leave myself vulnerable to attack while my weapons and fighter squadrons recharge.

It's a great system that makes each boss fight a gruelling, merciless war of attrition. But *Crying Suns*' regular battles are rarely ever as tough – even if I go looking for trouble. Once I understand some of the cool nuances of combat, enemies just can't put up much of a challenge.

Crying Suns is also too forgiving. My ship has multiple health bars that will recharge after each fight so long as they're not depleted entirely, resources needed to repair my ship and buy upgrades are a little too plentiful, and enemies often lack firepower and frequently use the same tactics again and again. By the time I beat the game on normal difficulty, I've only died a few times – not exactly the kind of challenge I want from a good roguelike, even if playing on hard does help a bit.

With excellent storytelling and worldbuilding, *Crying Suns* is a good strategy game with some chaotic combat that ultimately feels a little too easy. Repetitive encounters and a general lack of challenge mean that my journey through the corpse of a galactic empire just doesn't feel as hard-fought as it should. ■

SHIPPING OUT

There are six different vessels to unlock – here are our favourites



KAOS CLASS

This battleship starts with no guns but has a fighter bay full of explosive drones that can overwhelm enemies.



JERICO CLASS

Armed with a gun that freezes enemy squadrons, turning them into sitting ducks for its slow-moving but long-ranged cruisers.



VOID CLASS

This pirate ship has an auxiliary system that takes over neutral turrets on the combat grid, giving you some extra firepower.



HAMMER CLASS

Armoured bulkheads and a nuke that obliterates a section of the battle grid, this ship gives a beating just as well as it takes one.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

It's a little too repetitive and easy for its roguelike structure, but *Crying Suns*' story and frantic combat are still a blast.

79



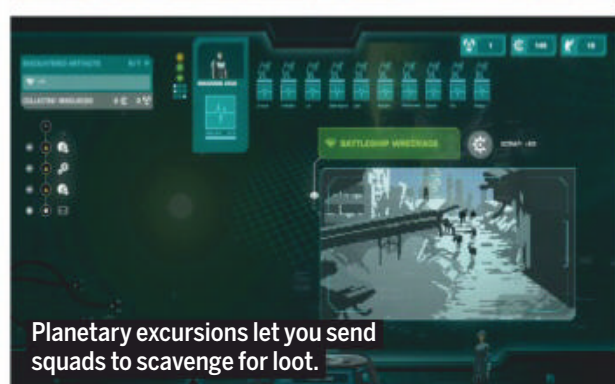
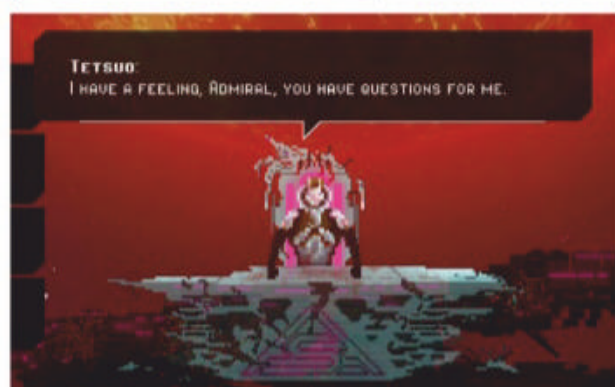
Fighter squadrons come in different types that each counter others.



It wouldn't be sci-fi without some magical space portal nonsense.



Crying Suns' pixel graphics are gorgeous.



Planetary excursions let you send squads to scavenge for loot.



Random events often end in combat with enemy factions.

HOLY DIVER

BLASPHEMOUS, repent for thy sins.

By Callum Agnew

Exemplaris Excomvnicationis. I have no idea what these words mean, but every death is accompanied by the same grim message. I've been seeing it a lot. *Blasphemous* is a 2D Metroidvania set in a Catholic-themed apocalypse and, like every other game released, has a clear *Dark Souls* inspiration. With its gory pixel art style, moody soundtrack and tortured enemies, it's easy to get sucked into *Blasphemous*' doomed and miserable world.

You play as a grim, pinheaded warrior, the ominously dubbed 'Penitent One', who begins his quest after waking up in a castle flooded with identical, naked, corpses of his fellows. Little nuggets of lore fed via the various characters you meet throughout the journey do a good job in fleshing out the world. Saints, oracles and, guilt-ridden pilgrims; all the suffering have something to say.

'Suffering' is the perfect word to describe *Blasphemous*. The world is in perpetual pain, enemies are agonised by their own existence, everyone is either dead or dying and progress in the game itself cannot be gained without a few grotesque deaths of your own. Even the act of healing requires you to smash a glass of blood into your face. Every moment is unsettling and my morbid curiosity drags me from screen to screen.

Combat is a simple affair; you start with a simple one-button three-hit

combo that can be upgraded to four with a few different directional finishes. There are a handful of upgrades you can unlock that increases your move set, but it's all basic. You get a dash, plunging, range and charged attack, none of which you need to utilise. There are special 'fervour bar' reliant abilities called prayers, but only one can be equipped at a time. Unfortunately the prayers are dull to use and there's not much

variety to choose from.

The combat's focus is instead on learning enemy patterns and precise positioning. *Blasphemous* is at its best when I'm dancing through a screen full of fast-moving attacks, perfectly timing my hits to knock projectiles away while looking for a gap to strike. But once I learn the fights, the execution becomes simple.

The stars of the *Blasphemous* show are undoubtedly the boss fights. Their difficulty can range from overly simple, an easy clear on the second

'Suffering' is the perfect word to describe Blasphemous

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A dark 2D Metroidvania

EXPECT TO PAY
£28

DEVELOPER
The Game Kitchen

PUBLISHER
Team17 Digital Ltd

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1070, i7-8700, 16GB RAM, SSD

MULTIPLAYER
Nun (LOL)
LINK
blasphemousgame.com

attempt, to a crushing hour of trial and error, each death chipping off an extra inch from the boss's health bar.

Hidden throughout the game, usually after a boss, there are altars that increase the damage of your attacks. While this does make running through previously explored areas easier, it has the unfortunate effect of trivialising some boss battles.

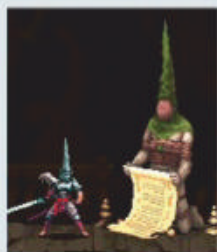
ORIGINAL SIN

Blasphemous' biggest pitfall is its platforming. Some of the jumps are far too precise. Most of my deaths are due to a missing the exact timing by a fraction of a second. It's the spike pits that I have the most problems with. For all other jumps, pinhead automatically grabs onto the ledge, but you're not afforded that margin for error with the plethora of spike falls littered around the world.

Repeatedly dying to an enemy or a boss is one thing. I'm learning. Eventually I will figure out how to rip their head off and feel that sweet, sweet catharsis. Repeatedly dying to a platforming obstacle? There is no catharsis to be had. I can't kill it, there is no victory. Dying to the same jumps for five minutes straight is deeply frustrating. It's an annoyance getting between me and the real fights. It gets to the point where I plan my routes around them.

Blasphemous features multiple endings, the requirements for which are suitably vague. After one completion I have enough understanding of the game's world to have a clue as to where I should look, and like any good Metroidvania, I feel suitably intrigued to return for at least one more playthrough. It's not the best game of its kind, but *Dark Souls* fanatics would be remiss to let *Blasphemous* pass without a look. ■

HELP. ME. Friends, allies, and weird statues



DEOGRACIAS
The narrator. He'll be explaining the plot to you. He likes bondage.



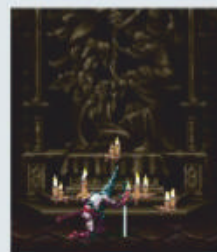
SWORD PERSON
This is your best friend, they increase your max health. What a pal.



GIANT STATUE
When you die, your fervour bar is decreased. This guy fixes that.



DODGY PLUMBING
This lovely lady lets you heal yourself more times.



SWORD THING?
Whatever this unsettling creation is, it upgrades your sword, so we like it.

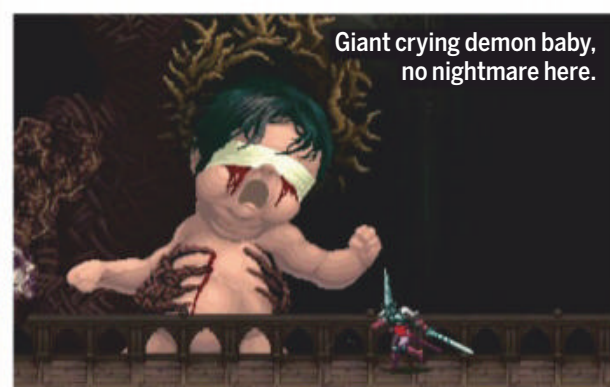
PC GAMER VERDICT

Lack of depth, variety and some platforming missteps stains an otherwise great and oppressive experience.

70



Laurence, is that you?



A strong contender for the most uncomfortable helmet ever



KANE AND ABLE

EFOOTBALL PES 2020 carries the same flourishes and failings forward for another year. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

Daniilo D'Ambrosio heads off an opposition pass with an outstretched foot, finds some space on the right and surges forward. He looks up and notices Radja Nainggolan's made a run clear of his Bologna marker and outside-foots it to intercept his trajectory. It's a few seconds of lithe, deeply human football that cuts out half the opposition, and with the final third theirs for the taking, my attackers descend on the box, smelling blood.

Perisic is the spearhead of that advancing line, and Nainggolan picks him out with a perfect through ball. All he has to do is dink it up past the keeper's flailing arm. He gives up on the run and watches the ball roll harmlessly past him.

Such is the freeform, mercurial, usually convincing and yet often frustrating football that *PES* has played for several years now. Only it's not called football this time, it's *eFootball*, the added

character presumably some sort of enthusiastic nod towards esports.

Don't be eFooled though, the modes are just as they always were. Become a Legend zooms the microscope in on a single player and lets you live out a career – though nothing as choreographed as *FIFA's* The Journey – while Master League's there for longform pursuit of team glory in offline form, and MyClub provides the real showpiece. A full-fat, menu-laden odyssey of online competition, team-building, and stat-padding. Online multiplayer offers a new Matchday mode akin to limited-time raids in MMOs along with divisions, quick play and co-op. These things we know, of course, they've been that way since the formation of Pangea.

What has changed, marginally but perceptibly, is what happens on the pitch. There's an influx of new animations in all aspects of the game, and the end result is indeed a more realistic game of football. That's not to say it's always a prettier one – for every new bit of bicycle kick mocap, an improvised finish, or a pass that would have been right at home in the

Joga Bonito adverts, there are a legion of new ways to show players tussling with each other, miss-kicking the ball, or crowding each other out.

That has an odd effect, in truth. Part of you is nodding along in appreciation of the purity and realism, while the other part just wants your players to go whirring around like cartoon characters as they did 15 years ago. On balance, it's a definite improvement. It doesn't always make

for a more spectacular game of football, though.

With your players now empowered to make all manner of new cock-ups along with all the ones they proved themselves eminently capable of making in previous titles, an added pinch of concentration's required. It's crucially important to use players' bodies to face the direction they're passing and keep an eye on trajectory and

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Tiny men on your screen playing pretend football, again

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Konami

PUBLISHER
Konami

REVIEWED ON
i5 6500, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
www.konami.com/wepes/2020/eu/en

momentum, because if their stats don't let them pull off backheels they'll try – and fail – to turn on a dime and gallumph the ball into touch when you ask too much of them. That's especially true of crossing. This is the area that feels the most evolved from *PES 2019* because it rewards proper body positioning and timing with some fantastic, varied deliveries, and also punishes artless taps of the cross button with demeaning scuffs.

ON ME HEAD

When it comes to problems, though, the song remains the same. Even aside from *eFootball PES 2020's* scant licences, its presentation still feels 40 or 50 years behind *FIFA's*. There's nothing here to contend with Alex Hunter's cheesy but luxurious cinematics, and the big new feature in Master League is the inclusion of wordless, faintly creepy cutscenes between your chosen manager avatar and other club staff. It's endearing, in its own way, but it's a world away from EA Sports' patented polish.

The failings aren't just surface-level, though. There's an odd dullness to AI players which isn't entirely new but manifests itself in new ways thanks to the increased emphasis on tussles and loose balls pinging out of challenges. They seem simply incapable of pouncing on the ball themselves, and there isn't always time to select them and move them manually before the moment escapes.

And yet – how many times have you read this statement over the years? – *PES* still plays more convincing football than its rival. Players don't seem to snap between canned animations anything like as much as in *FIFA*, and for eFooty purists that's all that matters. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Grittier and more convincing than ever, the soccer juggernaut excels on the pitch but barely tries off it.

77

There's an influx of new animations in all aspects of the game

UNCANNY VOLLEY

PES 2020's most frightening face scans



OLEKSANDR ZINCHENKO
MAN CITY
Who has done this to you, Zinny? Tell us and we'll avenge you.



KIERAN TRIPPIER
TOTTENHAM
Maybe it's best he moved to Spain after all, with that gruesome visage.



DECLAN RICE
WEST HAM
Half-man, half-brow. Perhaps a bee stung him above his nose.

FUT LOOSE

Beneath the fireworks and confetti,
FIFA 20's lacking match fitness. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

Imagine having lived a life in which you've only ever seen football played through the prism of *FIFA*, then happening to catch Match of the Day on telly one fateful Saturday night. What is this? Goals scored from situations besides counterattacks? Successful long balls? Players pressing in the opposition half? It'd be like eavesdropping on a broadcast from some mad alien world. And it would really suck the fun out of your next game of *FIFA*.

The problem isn't that *FIFA 20*, like so many of its predecessors, doesn't play very much like a real game of football. That's a necessary evil of cramming 90 minutes of the real game into a digestible ten minutes you can control with a gamepad. The problem is that *FIFA 20*'s quasi-football simply isn't very enjoyable.

There are new chunks of content in this year's game, Volta football being the headline act on a bill including new House Rules for FUT and friendly matches, revamped set-pieces and a defending overhaul. And once again it's all bundled into one of the slickest presentation packages in the medium, visually and audibly almost like-for-like with a Sky Sports broadcast on the pitch, and dripping with detail in every menu screen. You only need to open a FUT pack and witness the jamboree of fireworks and on-pitch ceremony to appreciate how finely crafted the *FIFA 20* ecosystem is.

Of the new class, Volta asserts itself as the star. With Alex Hunter's

Journey now at its conclusion, it picks up the narrative duties with a tale about a young streetball player called Revy with a dream, numerous bickering teammates, and a wholly unsurprising series of setbacks and triumphs to navigate

on the way to establishing his or herself as the best bloody Volta player in the world.

You can play the kind of meat-and-potatoes pass and shoot football here if you

wish, but really these 3v3, 4v4 and 5v5 games are about skill and self-expression. The story won't keep anyone up at night with its twists, but it's a means to an end, and that end is a different flavour of football.

REFEREE!

Back in the realm of 11-a-side football though and an familiar style of football resumes play. The quality of animation remains impressive, whether it's in ugly squabbles or audacious overhead kicks. But this year more than any previously, *FIFA*'s players feel tangibly locked to 8-way

That rigidity means it's a very prescribed style of football that prevails

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest in EA's long-running licensed soccer sim series

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
EA Vancouver

PUBLISHER
EA Sports

REVIEWED ON
i5 6500, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 22 players

LINK
ea.com/games/fifa20

movement grids, not least because old adversary *eFootball PES 2020* does such a great job of freeing its athletes from them by comparison.

That rigidity means it's a very prescribed style of football that prevails; death by counterattack, a perpetual drill of slotting a through ball to the lad with the highest pace stat and finesse-shooting the subsequent one-on-one. Defenders are now much less automated when you're in control of them and the standing tackle has a rangier strong tackle variant when you hold it, so in this sense *FIFA 20* presents new scoring opportunities. But running through on goal because your online opponent ballsed up the special combination of jockeying, tracking, sprinting and tackling needed to press players now doesn't make you feel very much like Killian Mbappe.

And that's all the more frustrating because in so many ways, *FIFA 20* is engaging. It holds your attention, invites you to imagine being in possession of a full squad of black FUT cards, and gets you plotting your journey from here to there in microscopic detail thanks to new Season Objectives. It rewards your grind with various currencies, trinkets, customisation options and doodads. In that regard, it's decades ahead of *PES* and its comparatively low-rent MyClub.

But you're kidding yourself. Because however much enjoyment you take from competency and victory, however many times you watch that replay back of the Volta goal you scored by flicking it backwards over a defender, losing another with an elastico and backheeling it into the net, *FIFA 20*'s biggest failing is in the fundamentals of an enjoyable football match. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

Glistening with smart presentation touches, but the crucial on-pitch action feels joyless next to its rival *PES*.

72

SNEIJDER HOUSE RULES

The best new kick-off variations



1 KING OF THE HILL
Dribble around in a wee box for points.



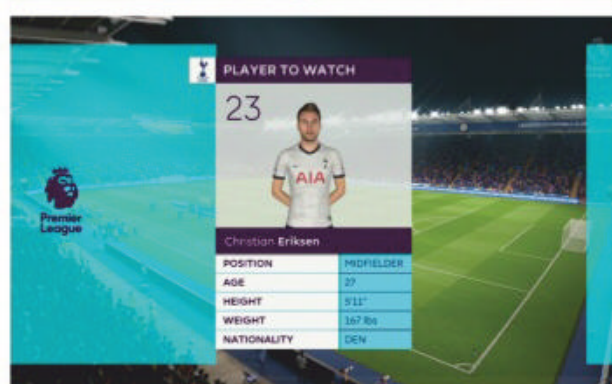
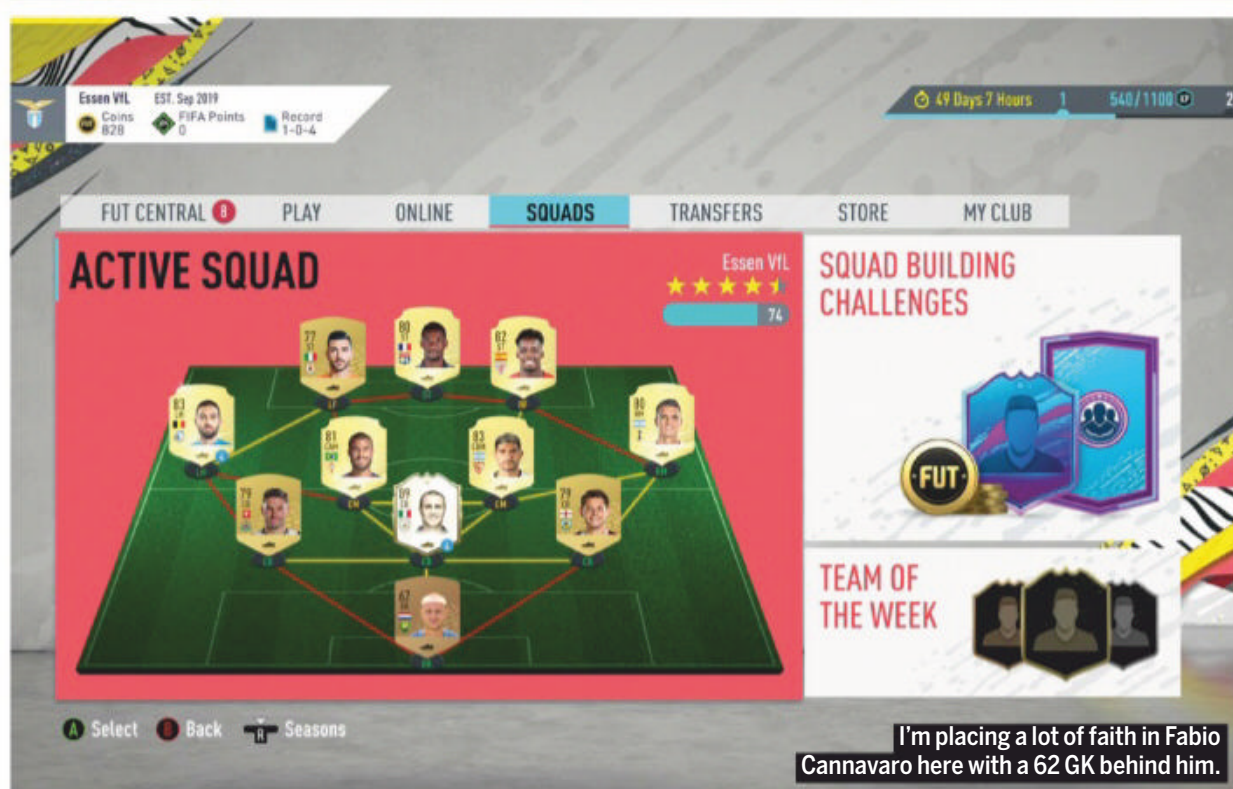
2 NO RULES
Exactly what it sounds like. VAR? GTFO.



3 MYSTERY BALL
The player in possession gets a random stat boost.



Inter, about to go five goals down to an unbearable 12-year-old.



FALLING IN LINE

GREEDFALL understands what makes action RPGs good, but not great. *By Lauren Morton*

GreedFall's systems parrot those of successful RPGs, but they're all a bit thin. It has a tactical pause system that lets me queue up an action for my protagonist, but not the members of my party. I can assign armour and weapons to my party members, but not manage their skills or combat tactics. And so on. *GreedFall* contains all the things I like in RPGs. I wish that I could pick even one of them to praise without caveats.

I'm interviewing a grizzled member of a mercenary faction as I investigate the disappearance of a talented young soldier. Sweet-talking and browbeating people with my title is a big part of my job as the ambassador of my own faction, the Congregation of Merchants, in this colonial-era fantasy world. To drag information about a secret training program out of him I choose between three dialogue choices: try to persuade him, pay to bribe him, or allow my companion, Kurt, to do the talking. I've invested my attribute points in charisma, so I'm able to persuade him.

I like that I have multiple options in each interaction, but as always in *GreedFall*, something is slightly off. The mildly uncanny lip movements are a minor distraction shared by many of *GreedFall*'s characters, and the quality of the voice acting varies, with one of my favourite merchants constantly belting his lines out devoid of a sense of human cadence.

If one of *GreedFall*'s systems deserves a callout, it's the ability to approach most of its quests with a mixture of stealth, disguise, charisma, and force. When it comes to blows, combat is divided into the standard strength, agility, and magic modes of attack, while weapon choices are setting-appropriate things like rapiers, maces, and rifles.

I create a build focused on agility for dealing out high damage with one-handed weapons and accuracy with firearms. Executing standard light strikes builds up my 'fury' meter which can then be spent on heavier

strikes. For large groups of enemies I place down a couple area of effect traps, use my rifle to lock on and take out those closest to death, and then weave together light and fury attacks.

A few larger bestial enemies have area of effect attacks or charge forward to knock me off my feet, but the vast majority of animals lunge forward at my party without finesse. The occasional human group of enemies mix swordplay with rifles. I'm not able to entirely mow through enemies on the normal difficulty level, but very few challenge me to alter my quickly-established routine.

The mildly uncanny lip movements are a minor distraction

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Bioware-aping action-RPG set in a fantasy colonial era

EXPECT TO PAY
£44

DEVELOPER
Spiders

PUBLISHER
Focus Home Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, intel i7 8700k, 16GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
greedfall.com

STORYBORED

The overarching narrative concerns colonists of the four main factions all seeking a cure for the fatal 'malichor' disease and abusing the native people of Teer Fradee in search of it. The Bridge Alliance (scientists) and Theleme (the church) are constantly at war, exploiting the native people as either test subjects or converts.

GreedFall acknowledges that all this is terrible, but only with overt displays of evil, such as a native being murdered in the centre of a city street for refusing conversion. But it fails to say anything about dehumanisation or systems of oppression beyond noting their existence.

As a distraction from the horrors, you can make a move on one of your companions, but the whole thing is quite dry. Three of my five pals are romanceable as a woman and completing side quests for each will increase our relationship until I'm able to make bedroom eyes at my paramour. Both the verbal overtures of love and the sexy cutscenes are serviceable rather than spicy.

Where *GreedFall*'s story does shine is in the cinematic cutscenes marking pivotal story moments, which bring the drama and gravitas that I wish its romances enjoyed. As its story climaxes, these emotional scenes grow closer together, as do the consequences of decisions I've made in earlier quests. *GreedFall* catches its stride in the last several hours, nearly enough to make me forget the first 30 hours that were so decidedly average.

GreedFall is not the heir to the *Dragon Age* throne, but it is, in a word, adequate. If *Dragon Age* is a veteran gone on sabbatical, *GreedFall* is a middling new hire called in to keep its seat warm without making a mess of the office in its absence. ■

WILL OF THE PEOPLE

Factions define Greedfall's world



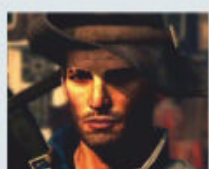
ISLANDERS
The natives would like everyone to stop killing and kidnapping them.



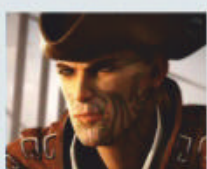
THELEME
Your typical theocracy, out to convert the world to monotheism.



BRIDGE ALLIANCE
A nation of inquisitive scientists.



COIN GUARD
Hard-bitten mercenaries who fight for the other factions.



NAUTS
Tattooed sailors who rule the seas between the old world and the new.



MERCHANTS
The player character's faction of wealthy, neutral traders.

PC GAMER VERDICT

GreedFall's combat, romance, and multiple quest approaches fall in step with its betters but won't be taking the lead.

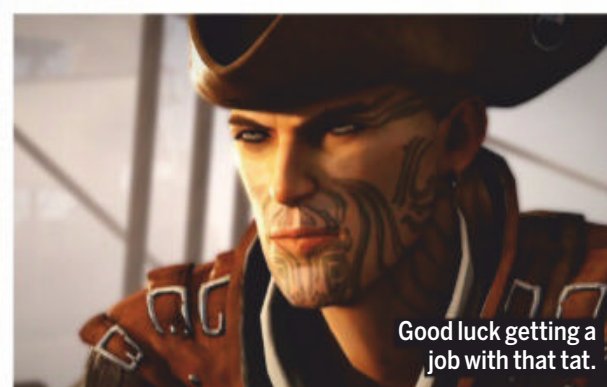
67



Not looking so neutral anymore.



Large enemies take longer to bring down, but combat follows the same flow.



Good luck getting a job with that tat.



Sneaking is just one way to get quests done.



Teer Fradee is a mix of indigenous villages and colonial cities.

LOVELY GHIBLI

NI NO KUNI: WRATH OF THE WHITE WITCH REMASTERED is a workaday RPG in an extraordinary world. *By Chris Schilling*

Very few games look better than their sequels, but then *Ni No Kuni* is an exception to most rules. It makes its debut on PC after its successor, last year's *Revenant Kingdom*, but that game lacked this one's secret weapon: a collaboration with legendary animation team Studio Ghibli that invests every inch of this sprawling JRPG with exceptional world-building, gorgeous cutscenes, and wonderfully expressive characters.

Before you get to its autumnal forests and icy grottos, however, you'll spend some time in the equally well-realised town of Motorville. When his mother dies a young boy called Oliver travels to a fantastical world in the hope of bringing her back to life. He's joined by Drippy, a teardrop-shaped fairy with a lantern dangling off the end of his nose, who is easily the best reason to stick with the English-language dub. Larking about and cracking wise in his rich Welsh burr – the highlight of what is a pretty terrific localisation – he's one of the most appealing partner characters in any RPG. Some might find him overly chatty at times, but he's always on the right side of annoying.

Then again, Drippy does contribute to the game's mollycoddling approach to the problems you face, whether it's a tricky boss or an environmental puzzle. Over the course of the game, Oliver gains a series of spells that let him unlock doors and chests, for

example, or restore withered fungi into springy steps. He can even gather emotions from those with an excess of them. With permission a lively villager will hand over their surplus exuberance so Oliver can

perk up a lethargic guard, say. But the solution is almost always handed to you on a plate, giving you no room to work things out for yourself. I'm not sure its nannying tendencies are excused by the fact that it's,

y'know, for kids – children are brighter than games aimed at them often give them credit for.

Blending command-based and real-time elements, the combat system isn't nearly so straightforward. At first, you'll directly control Oliver – though the stick he starts out with has little effect, and the wand he gets a couple of hours in isn't much of an improvement. Instead you'll rely on a range of familiars, friendly creatures you can feed and bond with between encounters. Positioning and timing is key as you choose whether to attack,

He's one of the most appealing partner characters in any RPG

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A well-liked JRPG belatedly makes its PC debut

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Level-5

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco Entertainment

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i3-8350K CPU, 8GB RAM, GeForce GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK
bit.ly/2mrLTsg

defend or dodge. You can pull off counter-attacks or cause opponents to miss you, leaving them vulnerable for a short time, while running around to collect health and magic pickups, and the rare golden drops that allow for special attacks.

In places it can feel fiddly and complex rather than deep, while in the early game you can get away with sending out your most powerful familiar and simply repeating the attack command. But over time, and with new characters and their familiars added to your party, it comes into its own.

WITCH WAY

The story, by comparison, is more conventional, though a relentlessly punning script lends a bit of flavour to some fairly well-worn JRPG tropes. Find the great sages! Seek out the magical stones! As such the appeal lies not in wondering what exciting plot development awaits you next (because, well, there aren't any) but rather what gorgeous new setting you're about to visit.

Your movement speed across the field map is slow, each trek to the next area punctuated by throwaway encounters against cannon-fodder enemies, but Hisaishi makes it all feel like an epic odyssey. As you progress you'll fill up an in-game tome that acts as a memento of your journey. It's nice to leaf through it every now and again to see how far you've come.

On paper it sounds sickeningly sweet, though there are hints of the undercurrent of darkness that runs through Ghibli's best work. *Wrath of the White Witch* is traditional to a fault, and lacks the kingdom-building hook of its sequel, but it makes for a pleasant, sporadically delightful, 40+ hours of playful escapism. ■

STUDIO INFLUENCE *Four more Ghibli-inspired games*



HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER

Alx Preston says Hayao Miyazaki's 1994 fantasy *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* inspired the *Drifter's* world.



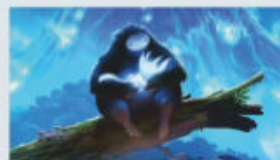
OKAMI

You don't have to look hard to spot elements of Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* in Capcom's excellent ink-wash, god-wolf adventure.



FORGOTTEN ANNE

No surprise that ThroughLine Games' whimsical adventure looks like a living cartoon: ex-Ghibli staff tutored its lead animator.



ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

This might seem to have more in common with the other Miyazaki, but its characters are totally Totoro-esque.

PC GAMER VERDICT

An exceptionally pretty if otherwise conventional JRPG with diverting combat. Not an all-timer, but well worth a (re)visit.

78

This chap is a thumbelemur. He doesn't like being hit but he can certainly dish it out.



You can open a gateway between Motorville and the Other World to move between them.



One of the first tasks is to retrieve an actual red herring. Ha.

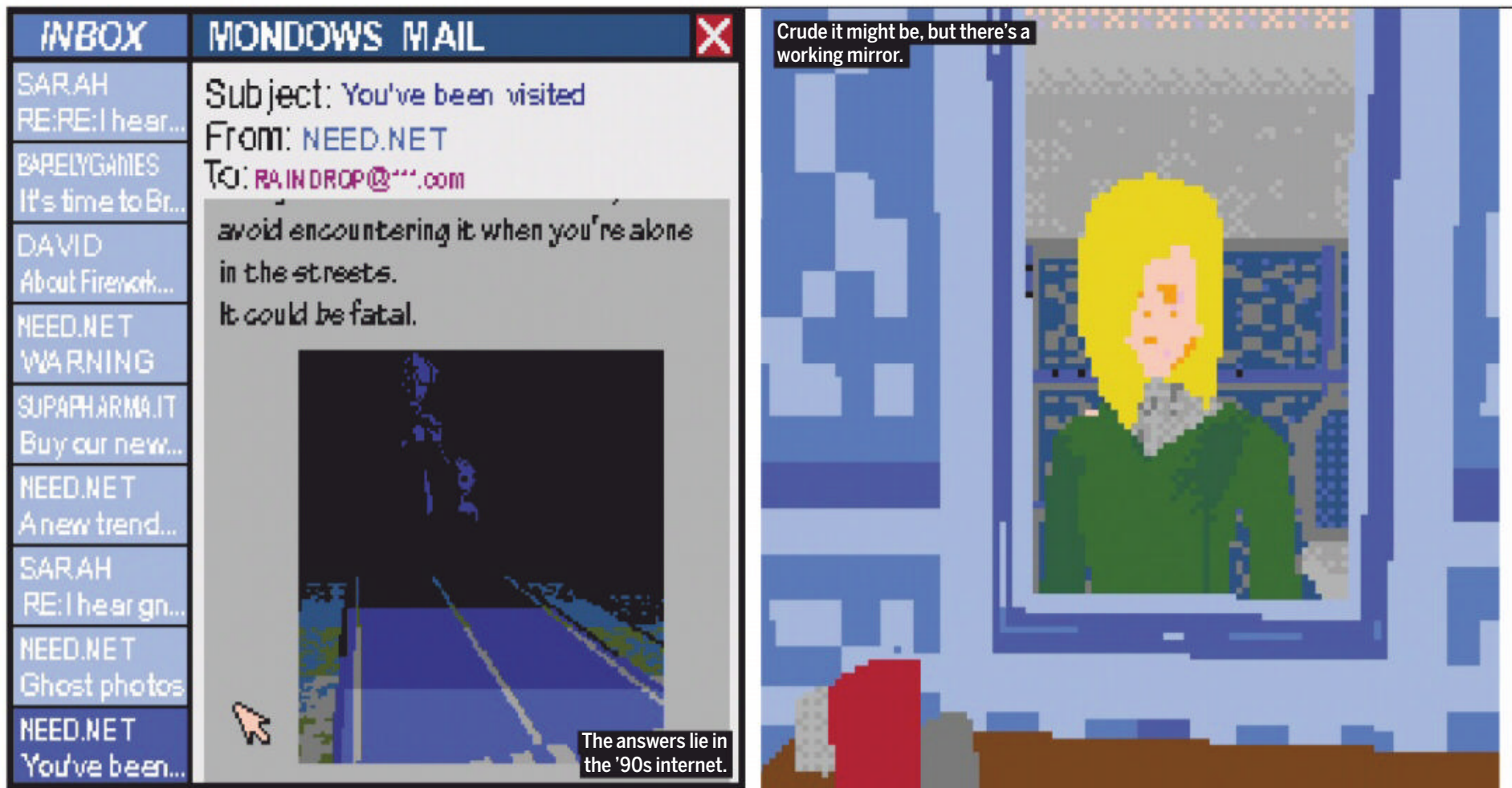


Oliver can see dead people – and, with the right spell, talk to them.



Horace

Hmm... Maybe I'll go on a little journey myself...
I haven't taken a look around our world for a long time.



PULL UP A CUSHION

Resident evil of your own making in the creepy **DISCOMFORT**

Discomfort is aptly named. I can almost picture the twinkle in developer Ivan Zanotti's eye when he found a name for his horror game, which is the one of the more discomfoting first-person games you'll play. Not because it's unsettling but because of its antiquated control scheme, which maps pretty much everything to the left side of the keyboard.

Before you ask, yes you can change the controls to the more standard WASD-with-mouse setup, but that feels somehow wrong, or inauthentic, like watching a version of Casablanca that's been coloured in.

Even so, *Discomfort* can be a pretty uncomfortable game to play. You're a woman in a house trying to summon a folkloric creature, a process that involves adventure-game-style scene examining, item collection and simple puzzling. None of it is

timed, and you're never required to aim with a pistol or anything like that, but it is quite frustrating, having to turn around with A and D, and look up and down by pressing R and F – we're in the 21st century, dammit.

But after a while, it fits. *Discomfort* successfully transports you back to the glorious 1990s, first with its crude textures, and then with its control

scheme, which not only places you in the body of a '90s protagonist, but in the body of the '90s player controlling her. *Discomfort* is fully realised, mostly uncompromising nostalgia. (While also allowing you to tinker with the controls, if you can't be arsed with that.)

But how is *Discomfort* as a horror game? Refreshingly different from the run-and-hide school that informs most modern horrors. Here you're attempting to bring the monster to

you, in a house that may not be your own, and where there's a dead body lying unceremoniously in one of the beds. Following a set of instructions, you'll supply a summoning circle with a range of creepy items including your own hair and, er, a body part, while finding the time to play on an old Game Boy left lying around. There are a few startling

There are a few startling sights lurking in *Discomfort's* periphery

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person horror game where you summon an undead spirit

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Ivan Zanotti

PUBLISHER
Ivan Zanotti

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz,
6GB RAM, GeForce
GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/Discomforting

sights lurking in *Discomfort's* periphery, and a rich atmosphere of domestic quiet. The sort of quiet where you just know something is waiting, ready to strike.

SITTING UNCOMFORTABLY

In some ways, horror is one of the easiest genres to develop in, because you can get away with suggesting rather than showing things to the player – drop them in a dark room and let their imagination do the rest. But it's also one of the hardest to get right. *Discomfort* puts the effort in, with its intriguing premise and short, but well-paced story.

And it's here that we circle back to the controls. In addition to serving the nostalgia factor, Zanotti's game disempowers the player by making everyday game actions feel sluggish and alien. The fear that something may be behind you is amplified greatly when you have to crane your head up and down, and spin around via clumsy keyboard keys. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

If *PT* was made for the Amiga, it would resemble this atmospheric horror that does retro right.

77

DROPPING THE BALL

Pinball madness in the bizarre **MR FLIPPER**

Some games take you by surprise, creeping up from behind and coshing you on the head with their ingenuity or, to be frank, their sheer weirdness. *Mr Flipper* is such a game. It's a pinball game, except it isn't, throwing much of the established framework of the ancient amusement out of the window.

You're the titular Mr Flipper, a sentient flipper who, at the touch of a button, can walk around. Your ultimate goal is not to set a high score, but merely to transport a single ball to the top of a vertiginous, scrolling pinball table.

This is easier said than done. Obstacles are numerous, including enemies determined to munch the ball, the inexorable pull of pesky gravity, and a steadily rising pool of lava that will completely destroy the ball if it's left too long within.

So here's what you do. In the traditional pinball style, you flip the ball upwards, before quickly upping sticks and chasing it around the board. If you're fast, and skilful enough, you can intercept it before it falls, and then slowly – frustratingly slowly – shepherd it up the board.

You probably won't succeed, because *damn* this is difficult. It's primarily the fault of the camera, which zooms in too far when you're a stationary flipper, making it tricky to plan your next move. You can only affect the pinball when stationary, and it can be maddening finding the right location to settle down.

It will ultimately be up to you, and your patience level, whether you stick with *Mr Flipper*, but even as I succumbed to the lava, again and again, it was hard to stay angry at this refreshingly bonkers pinball game. ■

62



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Willem Rosenthal

PUBLISHER
Willem Rosenthal

BLOOD SPORT

The **GOREBALL**'s in your court in this puzzler

From pinball to, er, *Goreball*, which is surprisingly similar despite the promise of blood inherent in the name. Imagine *Hotline Miami*, but with one bouncy ball instead of a variety of weaponry, and you're pretty close to this satisfying ping-'em-up.

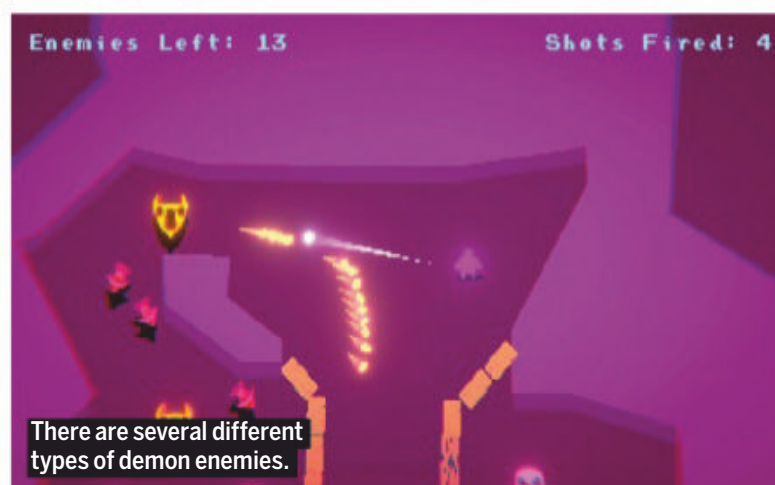
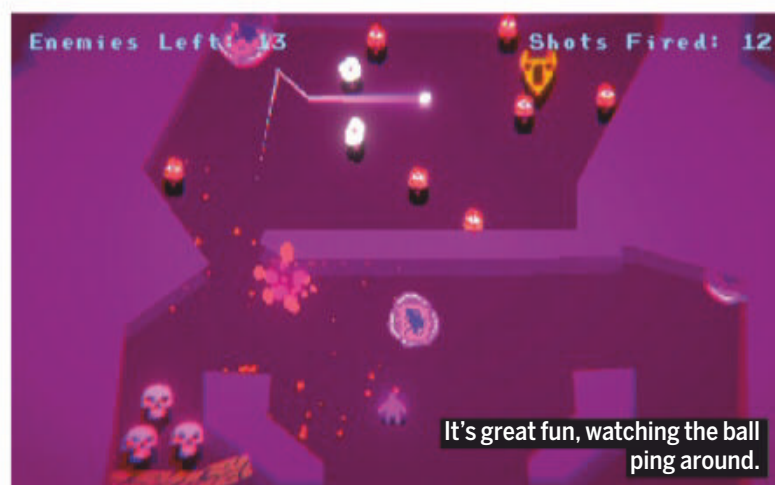
Each of the handful of levels is full of simplistic enemies who will swarm towards you when you wander too near. To progress you'll need to dispatch every one of them, with the only weapon at your disposal being a ridiculously boingy beach ball that will rebound hither and thither, exploding whatever monster that happens to be in its way.

I'm sure we've all made use of weapons or ammo like that before in games, but it's particularly well-implemented here. There's a satisfying amount of screenshake, a nicely measured cocktail of velocity

and inertia in the physics system, and those requisite little explosions of pixel confetti, to reward the player after each defeated enemy. Basically, *Goreball* feels great to play, to control from moment to moment.

I'm not going to pretend there's much more to it than that. But combine a fine-tuned physics engine, a bunch of carefully positioned enemies and walls, a single ball, and a single life with which to take them all out, and the result is a minimalist action-puzzle game where every failure feels almost as thrilling as each success. *Goreball* is a brief game, and one that bafflingly introduces, then waves goodbye to, a potentially exciting mechanic in its very last stage. (Namely, a block of jelly-like slime with additionally bouncy properties.) However, it left me wanting more – and how many games can you say that about? ■

75



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Chaoclype

PUBLISHER
Chaoclype

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



GALAXY MILK

Dairying to be different in the updated **NO MAN'S SKY**

Is there a more go-backable title than *No Man's Sky*? It's the jilted lover of games, tempting players to return with teeth-whitened, bespoke-tailored updates. If this was a romcom, we'd be approaching the fourth act finale when *No Man's Sky* sashays into the church looking fabulous, interrupts our wedding to *Astroneer* by banging on a window, and we speed off together in a ruby convertible. Tear off that veil. Laugh vivaciously. Roll the credits.

Actually returning to it, however, can feel like the difficult sequel. Having spent weeks playing the game when it first released, it makes sense to go right back to the start and see how it's changed. I start on a planet that feels like it should be a penal colony in a Lance Henriksen movie from the '90s – irradiated sands and plants trying to murder me. This might be a smart way of showing me how to manage resources to survive, or it might be the game punishing me for leaving. Either way I'm immediately reacquainted with the best and worst element of *No Man's Sky* – the relentless, cascading resource loop. It imparts a sense of purpose that can keep you playing indefinitely, but it can also feel like a byzantine hoop-jumping exercise in achieving something you don't understand.

“New tools that let me build bases and manipulate the earth”

Never question why you're punching trees to charge your laser to shoot trees to craft a hermetic seal, just do it or the devil planet will take you.

Once that initial dump of busy work is out of the way, though, I remember how humbling and exhilarating it is when an entire universe opens up before you. These early stages feel like they have far more purpose, too, introducing me to important new tools

that let me build bases and manipulate the earth. The latter feels especially powerful compared to the vanilla game, in which you only seemed to be able to interact with everything on a superficial level. In fact, it might be too powerful. Seeing huge chunks of ground melt away like butter on hot toast reminds me this world is procedural, not real.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Endless space exploration game about finding new planets and ruining them

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Hello Games

PUBLISHER
Hello Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
nomanssky.com

UDDERLY DELICIOUS

There's one thing in the most recent update that excites me more than anything else: the ability to interact with the fauna. The creatures in *No Man's Sky* were always the most interesting and unexpectedly comedic element of the game, and the thought of milking them is irresistible. I land on a barren planet and don't have the fuel to leave, so I waste 30 minutes trying to take off again. Time is of the essence – it's time to try Creative Mode. I befriend the animals like a cosmic Dr Doolittle. Before long I'm riding some kind of lumbering hippo-lizard, its nutrient-rich lactose still fresh on my lips, while the rest of its herd follows behind. It's an inspiring moment, made better by the fact I'm so wrapped up in the majesty of it all that I walk it straight off a nearby cliff. I'm uncertain if I'd be quite this happy if it'd taken me ten hours to get here – but now I'm too hopped up on suspicious milk to care. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Despite the excruciating resource management, I can't stay angry at a game that lets me start an interstellar dairy farm.

75

FLIGHT CLUB

Violence and kidnapping in **HEAT SIGNATURE**

I love how clear everything is in *Heat Signature*. Instead of apologising for asking you to use the pause button, it positively encourages it. It's like a supportive parent, albeit one who's incentivising me to board spaceships and bludgeon strangers. There's a ruthless efficiency to the way it operates. I wish I could say the same of myself.

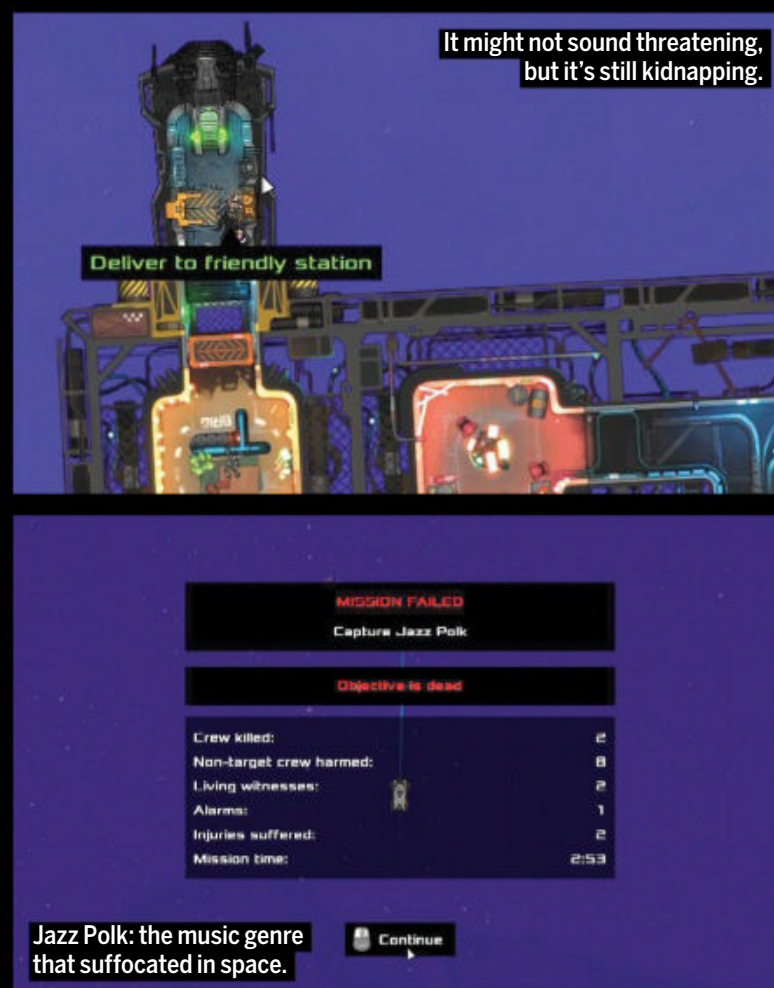
My early attempts to complete missions are often ruthless but rarely efficient. Because of this, my first life is a short one. I do some great wrench violence to begin with – there's something intoxicating about a bright future where clubs are better than guns – but I get overzealous during a rescue mission and smash into the ship I'm tracking, destroying my pod. It's a lesson well learned.

I approach my future prey with the caution of a novice driver

learning to parallel park in their mum's Audi. My next mistake comes from reckless use of melee weapons. I take on a job to capture some intergalactic ne'er-do-well but I smack them too hard with a hammer and they go flying through a window into the suffocating void of space. I try to collect their unconscious body with my pod, but I'm still dogshit at flying. I end up doing doughnuts around my dying quarry and they expire before I can reach them. I make myself feel better by abducting an unconscious guard instead. This leads to a period of impromptu space kidnappings. The missions that follow are rich with varied and hilarious disasters, which is exactly what makes *Heat Signature* so good.

Most games try their hardest to make me feel cool, but *Heat Signature* loves me for the kidnapping star-klutz I am. ■

86

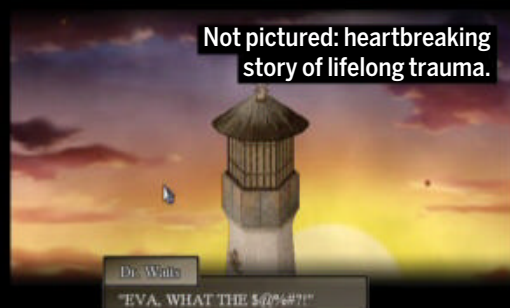


NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Suspicious Developments

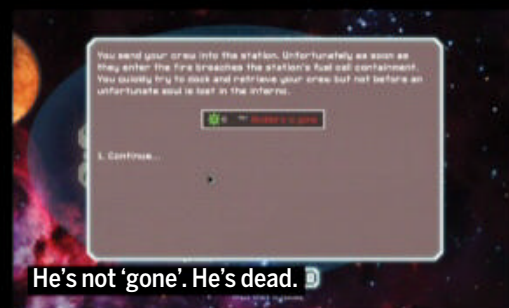
PUBLISHER
In-house



TO THE MOON

This is a slight departure from the intergalactic theme, and perhaps a necessary one after the wrench-shattered skulls of *Heat Signature*. I love *To the Moon*'s memory-implanting adventure because it's slow and sad like a dropped pet tortoise. The gimmick of rewinding time and scrutinising a quietly disappointing life is crushing. It takes a while to engage with the characters but this allows you to connect with their subject, Johnny, on a level rarely seen in games. And *To the Moon* is a braver, more nourishing experience because it narrows its focus to one person. Describing it as Quantum Leap meets Inception via the saddest bits of Up is a disservice. But also, it's true. ■

78



FTL

There are two ways to play *FTL*. The first is a rigorous, twitchy, hopeful adventure, in which you try to get as far as you can by meticulously plotting every move and praying that the gods are with you. The alternative is to name your crew after your bezzie mates and laugh when they get devoured by moon spiders. And both are legitimate choices, because *FTL* is outstanding.

It's the sort of game where even the most savage failures do nothing to deter you. But it's also the worst title to play when you have four more entries to write for these pages, because all I want to do is lollap back into space and find a new way to accidentikill my closest friends. ■

90



ENDLESS SPACE 2

I'm trying *Endless Space 2* after seeing and getting excited by Amplitude's upcoming *Humankind*. There's something about it being set in space that feels more challenging for a strategy fan used to planting crops and researching longbows, and the density of information in the UI compounds this. But it clicks once I've clambered over the precipitous learning curve. And as much as I love the variety of approaches I can take, it's the absurd level of panache that makes me want to keep playing. ■

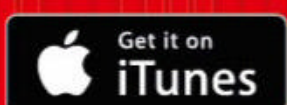
80

Enjoy the
magazine?

 PC GAMER
Podcast

Listen to the (almost)
weekly UK podcast!

LISTEN NOW AT **PCGAMER.COM** OR DOWNLOAD ON ITUNES.



PC GAMER.COM

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



92

GROUP TEST

The best motherboards money can buy.



98

BUYER'S GUIDE

Get the best PC parts for your build, no matter your budget.

96

TECH REPORT

Delving into the computing power of nanotubes.

GROUP TEST

MOTHERBOARDS

The motherboard is a crucial piece of your gaming PC. Here's how to find the right one for you. *By Alice Newcome-Beill*

Not all motherboards are created equal. While the differences between them might not be as obvious or exciting as found in the world of graphics cards or CPUs, it's vital to make sure you find the right board for you. Choose well, with an eye for the specs and details that matter, and you're potentially making a long-term investment for your machine – especially if take care to find something future-proof with room to grow. Intimidated? Don't be. Let our guide take the stress out of your decision, with a breakdown of the best motherboards no matter your price range.



2



Z390 Aorus Ultra

GIGABYTE **£240**

The best Intel gaming motherboard

1 Gigabyte isn't as flashy as the other top tier motherboard makers, but it has managed to accumulate plenty of recommendations of late. Combined with a consistently lower cost, that makes Gigabyte's Z390 Aorus Ultra a winner. We've liked the Aorus branded motherboards starting with Skylake in 2016, but this is the best we've tested.

The board has triple M.2 slots, Intel Wi-Fi Wave2 and Ethernet, a full RGB treatment with multiple headers, and ALC1220 audio. You'd have climb to the top of the product stack to get the same

from MSI and ASUS, both of whom offer more polish but also charge plenty for the privilege. This is great value.

The only real downside for us is that this board is perhaps a bit too flashy, and may not suit more restrained gaming builds. It's a small criticism of an otherwise top board, but when you're using the Z390 as the base for all your other components, it's worth considering how they'll look.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- No compromises on features
- Two LED headers
- Triple M.2 slots
- Potentially too much bling?

SPECS CHIPSET: Z390 / **RAM SLOTS:** 4, MAX 64GB DDR4-4266 / **PCI-E:** 3.0, X16, X16 (X8), X16 (X4), 3x X1 / **VIDEO:** HDMI / **USB PORTS:** 10x REAR, 7x INTERNAL / **STORAGE:** 3x M.2, 6x SATA / **NETWORK:** ETHERNET, 1733MBPS 802.11AC

MPG X570 Gaming Pro Carbon Wi-Fi

MSI **£270**

The best AMD gaming motherboard

2 The MSI MPG X570 is an amalgamation of bleeding-edge motherboard tech. Four DIMM slots that can handle speeds up to 4400Mhz and two M.2 slots sporting PCIe 4.0, the X570 is all about getting the most out of AMD's Ryzen 3000 CPUs.

The pair of PCIe 4.0 M.2 slots each have a dedicated heat shield and fan, and while this does help prevent potential thermal throttling, it makes installing or replacing them a more delicate process than with their exposed counterparts elsewhere. The

MPG X570 features enough compatibility to get the most out of your hardware now and in the future, provided you're willing to pay a premium for it. While it's certainly an excellent board, if you aren't already committed to top-of-the-line components now or in the near future, you may want to consider a slightly less expensive board for your needs.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- 2 PCIe 4.0 M.2 Slots
- Wi-Fi 6 Compatible
- Fiddly M.2 heat shields
- Expensive

SPECS CHIPSET: X570 / **RAM SLOTS:** 4, MAX 64GB DDR4-4400 / **PCI-E:** 4.0 X16, X16 (X8), X16 (X4), 2x X1 / **VIDEO:** HDMI / **USB PORTS:** 8x REAR, 4x INTERNAL / **STORAGE:** 2x M.2, 6x SATA / **NETWORK:** ETHERNET, 2.4GBPS 802.11AC

GROUP TEST



**THE STRIX Z390-I'S
CLEAN DESIGN
MAKES FOR QUICK
SYSTEM ASSEMBLY**

3

ROG Strix Z390-I Gaming

ASUS **£217**

Best for small form-factor builds

3 Despite its diminutive size and paucity of upgrade options, the ROG Strix Z390-I Gaming provides excellent performance and value. Boasting stable 5GHz overlocks using several memory speeds, including 3600MHz with tweaking, its single PCIe x16 slot pushed top-shelf graphics cards to speeds that matched or exceeded most Z390 ATX boards during testing.

The smallest Strix has a lengthy features list despite the tiny form factor, including dual PCIe 3.0 x4 M.2 slots, Intel v219 Ethernet, Intel 9560 2x2 802.11ac Wi-Fi, and an ALC1220A audio

codec supported by isolated circuitry and headphone amps. The Strix Z390-I's clean design makes for quick system assembly and configuration, although the previous generation sported a less bulky design, an important consideration for ITX rig building. Just be sure to install that bottom-mounted M.2 drive beforehand or pick a case with a cut out in the right area, or you'll be taking everything apart again.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Dual M.2 slots
- ➕ Great overclocking performance
- ➖ One M.2 slot is under the board
- ➖ New I/O port shield is bulky

SPECS CHIPSET: Z390 / **RAM SLOTS:** 2, MAX 32GB, DDR4-4500 / **PCI-E SLOTS:** 3.0 X16 / **VIDEO:** HDMI, DP / **USB PORTS:** 7 REAR, 1 FRONT, 4 INTERNAL / **STORAGE:** 2X M.2, 4X SATA / **NETWORK:** ETHERNET, 866MBPS 802.11AC

TUF H370-Pro Gaming Wi-Fi

ASUS **£140**

A budget option with excellent Wi-Fi

4 Asus' H370 board sports a bare-it-all retro look that back-to-basics rig builders will love, with a simple black and silver aesthetic and just a touch of RGB lighting along the right edge. It looks sharp and supports almost any colour combination you toss at it. If you're looking for something that won't make your rig look like a disco, this is a decent option.

The TUF Pro Gaming packs dual M.2 slots, 10Gbps Gen2 USB 3.1, Ethernet, and a robust 2x2 Intel 9560 802.11ac adaptor that supports MU-MIMO and 160MHz channels, shaming the competition in a price segment

where Wi-Fi is rarely found. Audio is less impressive, opting for the older ALC887 codec, but you can potentially make up some of this deficit with a decent gaming headset. Overclocking and higher memory speeds aren't supported by the H370 chipset, but that doesn't hold the TUF Pro Gaming back. Put your money into a faster GPU if you care about gaming, and don't worry too much about the RAM speed.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Great Wi-Fi implementation
- ➕ Excellent real-world performance
- ➖ Limited memory speeds
- ➖ Weak audio

SPECS CHIPSET: H370 / **RAM SLOTS:** 4, MAX 64GB, DDR4-2666 / **PCI-E:** 3.0 X16, X16 (X4), 4x X1 / **VIDEO:** D-SUB, HDMI, DP / **USB PORTS:** 7 REAR, 6 INTERNAL / **STORAGE:** 2x M.2, 6x SATA / **NETWORK:** ETHERNET, 1.73GBPS 802.11AC

HOW WE TEST

The motherboards recommended in this guide all received extensive research and evaluation, including enclosure installation (full tower, mid-tower, and ITX where applicable), performance benchmarking, stability testing, and a follow-up period of real-world break-in usage that focuses on gaming, entertainment, and media software.

When possible, all tests are performed with the same components installed to remove any variables except the motherboard itself. We also research the entire field of Z370, X470, X299, and older motherboards and narrow the list down to the best, most competitive boards before choosing each round of boards for the guide.

Benchmarks include AIDA 64 Extreme, PCMark 8/10, Cinebench 15, CrystalDiskMark, 3DMark FireStrike, DPC Latency Checker, and others. The real-world break-in period encompasses office and creative work, media streaming, and gaming with a variety of demanding titles like *GTA V*, *Total War: Warhammer II*, *Dirt Rally*, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, *Far Cry 5*, *Hitman*, and others.

Gaming tests are run at 1080p at medium to high settings to remove any bottlenecks caused by graphics card performance. When relevant, both single- and dual-graphics card configurations are tested to ensure motherboard stability in SLI and Crossfire situations.



Z390 UD

GIGABYTE £110

An affordable mid-tier Intel option

5 If you're looking for a Z390 board that's well specced but available at a great price, the Z390 UD (Ultra Durable) from Gigabyte is a top choice. It's packed with DIMMs for memory upgrades, plenty of SATA ports (and an M.2) for storage, and it's regularly available for less than £110.

It's targeted more towards budget systems and more professional users who aren't looking to spend extra budget on features deemed unnecessary which may for all intents and purposes remain unused.

The only real drawback on this board is the single x16 PCIe slot,

which is only critical if you plan on running multiple graphics cards. It's also using a cheaper Realtek ALC887 audio codec and Realtek RTL8111H Gigabit networking controller to power three 3.5 mm audio jacks and the single LAN port. The pair of x4 slots happily accommodate less demanding add-in cards, and the Z390 chipset makes a wonderful home for 8th and 9th gen Intel processors.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Excellent price
- ✦ Four RAM slots
- ✖ Only a single full PCIe x16 slot
- ✖ No Wi-Fi

SPECS CHIPSET: Z390 / **RAM SLOTS:** 4, MAX 64GB, DDR4-4266 / **PCIe SLOTS:** 3.0, X16, 2x X4, 3x X1 / **VIDEO:** HDMI / **USB PORTS:** 6x REAR, 4x INTERNAL / **STORAGE:** 1x M.2, 6x SATA / **NETWORK:** ETHERNET

X470 Aorus Gaming 5 Wi-Fi

GIGABYTE £200

A great gaming motherboard for Ryzen 7 users

6 There are more expensive X470 motherboards out there, including the excellent Asus ROG Crosshair VII, but forking over the extra cash for higher-end hardware won't necessarily provide a better building or gaming experience than Gigabyte's X470 Aorus Gaming 5 Wi-Fi. This board serves up a full plate of features along with a side of RGB style for around £100 less than comparable hardware, leaving your GPU budget some room.

Ryzen CPUs aren't overclock-happy, particularly the X-models, but the X470 Aorus Gaming 5's

8+3 phase VRM reliably allows chips like the 2700X to run all cores at full boost speeds alongside 3200MHz memory modules. Dual BIOS, dual PCIe Gen3 x4 M.2 slots, and a healthy stack of both internal and external USB ports are plenty for most gaming builds. Combined with a top-tier audio codec and great networking hardware, the X470 Aorus Gaming 5 is our best overall pick for Ryzen 7 builds.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ✦ Dual 32Gb/s M.2 slots
- ✦ Speedy Intel Wi-Fi and Bluetooth
- ✖ Other boards overclock better
- ✖ Few advanced hardware options

SPECS CHIPSET: X470 / **RAM SLOTS:** 4, MAX 64GB, DDR4-3200 / **PCIe:** 3.0, X16, X16 (X4), 2x X1 / **VIDEO:** HDMI / **USB PORTS:** 10x REAR, 9x INTERNAL / **STORAGE:** 2x M.2, 6x SATA / **NETWORK:** ETHERNET, 1.73GBPS 802.11AC

An earlier project of Shulaker's saw nanotubes and Resistive RAM cells built vertically on one another.

HELLO, WORLD!

The search for new, faster, cooler microchip materials is heating up

Your PC is made of sand. Or at least the bits that make it a PC are. Melted and refined sand is made into microchips because sand is made of silicon, which is a semiconductor, an element that acts as an electrical conductor under some conditions and as an insulator under others.

Fabricators such as GlobalFoundries, Intel, and TSMC turn sand into crystals, cut them into discs, etch complex circuits into their surface and turn them into i7s, DDR4, RTX 2080s and the like. This has been fine since the invention of the transistor in 1947 (though some transistors are made from germanium, another semiconducting element).

Now though, as the size of the integrated circuits on microchips reaches impossible smallness measured in single nanometres, the hunt is on for the next microchip material. It's not that sand doesn't work, but we're outgrowing it in our need for ever-faster chips with ever-greater transistor density.

Max Shulaker, assistant professor of electrical engineering and computer science at MIT and one of the authors of a paper demonstrating a nanotube processor, believes the future is in carbon nanotubes. "You can view it as a rolled-up sheet of graphene [see box] forming a nanocylinder," he says. "It's beautiful because it has no edges. The goal when making a processor is to always have your switches be as energy-

efficient as possible, and as fast as possible. Carbon nanotubes enable both of those things if you use them as the channel of the transistor."

NANOTUBES, SON...

Putting it in terms those of us without a computer science degree can relate to, Shulaker conjures forth the analogy of a water hose. "It takes less energy to step on a thin garden hose to turn it on and off than it does to step on a very thick fire hose. A nanotube is only a nanometre thin, it's as thin as you can go pretty much." And the energy saved by stepping on thinner hoses is considerable, "It's projected that, if you compare the exact same chips made from nanotubes and silicon, you can get an order of magnitude benefit in energy efficiency, says Shulaker. "That's characterised by what's called the Energy Delay Product, which basically means you go three times faster for one-third of the energy.

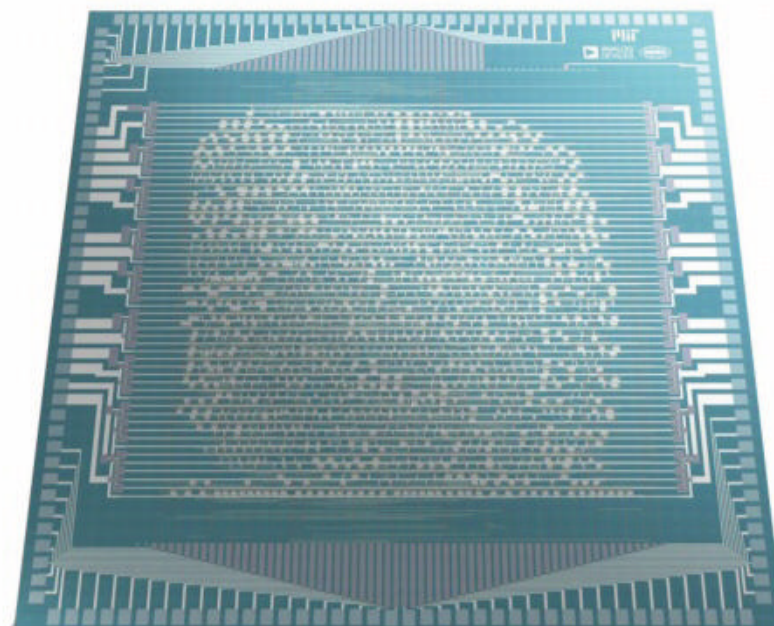
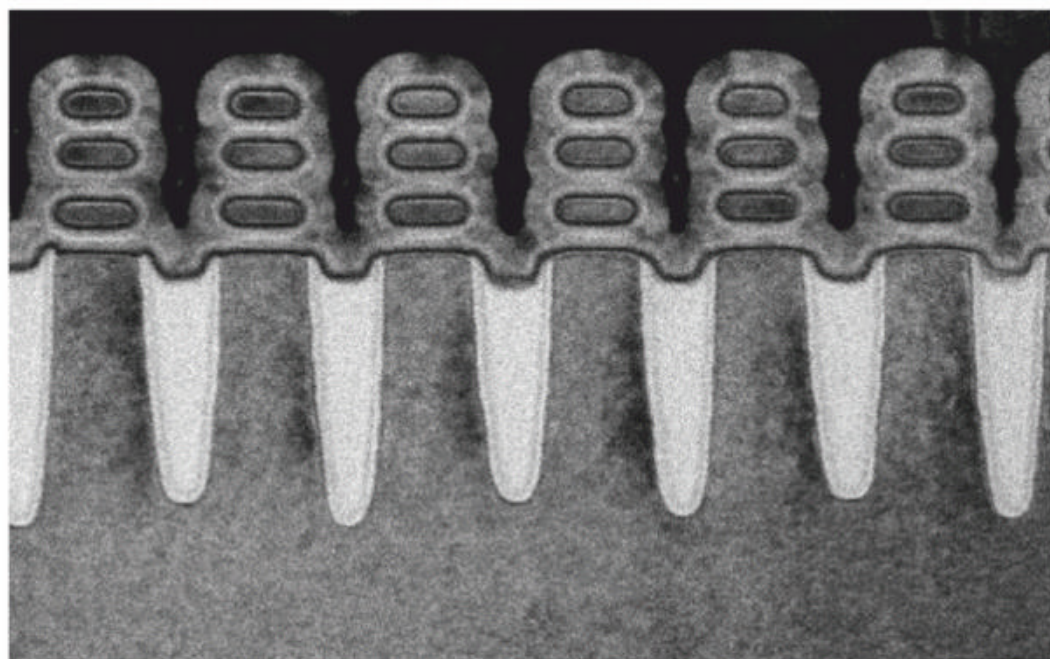
"The carrier transport – how easily electrons flow through them – of most materials degrades by orders of magnitude when you make them very thin. But nanotubes are always a nanometre thin, so always have a very good carrier transport. It's this combination that makes them so promising for making computers."

The production of transistors from carbon nanotubes is actually nothing new – it was first reported in 1998, but progress has been slow. Nanotubes can be semiconducting

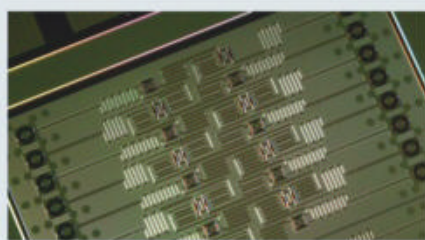


What is graphene?

Think of a honeycomb, but one that's made out of diamond and only one atom thick. Its hexagonal structure is 100 times stronger than atom-thick steel would be, floats in magnetic fields, conducts both heat and electricity, is almost transparent, and resulted in a Nobel Prize for its discovery in 2010.



GOOD CONDUCT *The other materials out to bust Moore's Law*



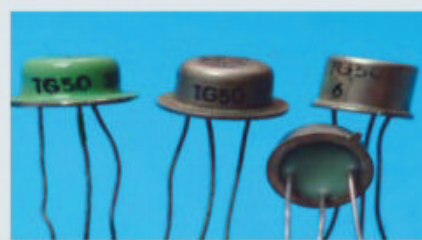
QUANTUM COMPUTER

Quantum computers could one day carry out tasks classical computers could never manage.



NANOMAGNETS

Nanomagnetic logic doesn't use an outside electric current, making it extremely efficient.



GERMANIUM

The first element used as a semiconductor, now alloyed with silicon to improve electron mobility.



III-V MATERIALS

With electron mobility up to 50 times greater than silicon, indium arsenide is starting to be used in chip designs.

(good) or metallic (bad), and metallic tubes stop the tiny transistors from working properly. The Shulaker team's approach changes the position of these metallic tubes, requiring merely 99.9% of them to be semiconducting, something achievable with today's manufacturing methods.

The chip MIT has produced doesn't use the X86 architecture beloved of Windows PCs, but the open-source RISC-V instruction set instead. In MIT's paper, all it did was print out "Hello, World! I am RV16XNano, made from CNTs," but underneath it's a fully functional RISC-V processor, capable of running any code written for it. And while it can't run Windows, a RISC-V port of Linux exists, pointing the way for increased complexity and eventual general-purpose computing on the platform. There's nothing to stop this production method being used to build an X86-compatible chip, however. "Whatever system you can imagine, we can now build," says Shulaker.

The use of nanotubes also enables changes to the manufacturing process that can produce new kinds of microchip. "Pretty much every chip today is two-dimensional, just on one layer," says Shulaker. "The reason the transistors are just on the bottom is because it takes 1,000°C to build a layer of silicon transistors. So if you put a layer of transistors on top of metal or other transistors you'd melt the stuff underneath. We can build nanotube transistors at room temperature, so we can build new types of architectures that bring more benefits than just from using the nanotubes alone. Our chip has metal wiring underneath the transistors, which

are in the middle of the chip, with more metal wires on top. So you can build these new, three-dimensional types of computer which provide you with further benefits. As soon as you do the 3D integration as well, the energy efficiency benefits can be even bigger, we're talking over 100x depending on the application."

In the same way that quantum computing always seems to be ten years away, whether it's 1999 or 2019, architectural breakthroughs such as these can take some time to make it to market. But with a working prototype in the lab, nanotube processors stand a very good chance of making that leap soon, especially if combined with current technology, "We're

working with several industry partners to transfer this technology into the real world," says Shulaker.

"We lead a very large programme sponsored by DARPA who are already integrating carbon nanotubes into US Foundry, a company

that does nothing but make chips. I really believe we're a matter of three to five years away from having chips inside things you interact with that still have silicon inside of them, but also carbon nanotubes. We can build carbon nanotubes right on top of any existing silicon chip. The exciting thing about nanotubes is that they're promising for so many different applications. Energy-efficient computing is something that affects every aspect of our lives, from low-power embedded chips to high-performance servers." And it's this versatility that makes nanotubes a good bet for being future tech we'll actually get to see in the real world. ■

By Ian Evenden

TOP LEFT: Traditional transistors etched into a silicon chip using IBM's 5nm process.

TOP RIGHT: MIT's carbon nanotube processor is large due to being lab-built. When released to industry, Shulaker expects them to become much smaller.

THE USE OF NANOTUBES ALSO ENABLES CHANGES TO THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,180

MOTHERBOARD		B360M-HDV ASRock £63 ASRock's B360M board definitely qualifies as 'no frills', but it'll still get the juice out of your CPU without bottlenecks.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-9100f Intel £94 An incredibly nippy quad-core CPU for the price, Intel's 9th gen budget chip skips integrated graphics for affordability.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Ventus 6G OC MSI £355 MSI's budget take on the RTX 2060 is lightning fast for the money, offering out-of-the-box overclocked values.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £28 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB Corsair £77 16GB of RAM gives you plenty of breathing room when running multiple programs, and Corsair's selling this kit cheap.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £73 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £51 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £40 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £34 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		G2460PF AOC £220 This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS Pro HyperX £80 A reliable and attractive board with no added frills from HyperX – plus it'll match that Stinger Core headset. Result.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £25 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 Deceptively luxurious for the price, Corsair's budget cans offer comfort and powerful low-end. Also colours. Very bright colours.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,584

MOTHERBOARD		Prime Z370 A II Asus £125 Great shielding, full of features, and featuring that – ahem – all important RGB lighting, this is a fine Asus board.
PROCESSOR		Core i5-8600K Intel £220 Six cores, six threads, good out-of-the-box clock speeds – and it's overclockable. No performance bottlenecks with this installed.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £355 Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £76 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		CX 650W Corsair £65 It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.
SSD		Evo 860 250GB Samsung £51 Samsung's Evo series has long been a stalwart of nippy r/w speeds and reliability, and this 250GB drive is very affordable.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £40 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £78 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		Elite XG240R Viewsonic £270 144Hz makes all the difference in a competitive environment, and Viewsonic's affordable 1080p panel offers just that.
KEYBOARD		One Ducky £110 A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the One.
MOUSE		G502 Proteus Spectrum Logitech £60 Logitech's revered G502 is comfortable, adjustable, and precise. Also 'Proteus Spectrum' sounds like a <i>Halo</i> map.
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £79 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,861

MOTHERBOARD

**Strix X470-F Gaming**Asus **£180**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR

**Ryzen 7 2700X**AMD **£230**

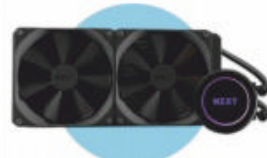
Easy to overclock and with huge performance out of the box, AMD's new flagship CPU is the one to go for.

GRAPHICS CARD

**GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition**EVGA **£1,161**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER

**Kraken X62**NZXT **£133**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY

**Ripjaws V 32GB @3200**G.Skill **£172**

G.Skill is always a safe bet for lightning fast RAM, and if you can do without the RGB frills this 2x16GB set will treat you right.

POWER SUPPLY

**HX750i 80 Plus Platinum**Corsair **£144**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD

**XPG SX8200 Pro 1TB**ADATA **£200**

A whole terabyte of M.2 storage with blistering read/write speeds, just waiting to be filled with Steam games you'll never play.

HDD

**WD Blue 4TB**Western Digital **£96**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE

**Enthoo Evolv ATX TG**Phanteks **£180**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY

**AW3418DW**Alienware **£780**

34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.

KEYBOARD

**G513**Logitech **£125**

It's got the RGB backlighting without feeling too showy, but crucially the G513's Romer-G switches feel supremely comfy.

MOUSE

**G502 Lightspeed**Logitech **£130**

The Lightspeed is the very latest edition of Logi's loveable G502, and while it might look familiar nearly all internal parts are new.

HEADSET

**GSP 670**Sennheiser **£330**

Sennheiser's first wireless gaming headset shoots for audiophile territory with great control placement and 16 hours of battery.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Black triangles represent the mysterious Board.



“This is a warped place where the natural laws of physics do not apply”

Discovering a surprising cinematic influence in **CONTROL**

The setting for Remedy's new shooter is the Oldest House, a monolithic, windowless skyscraper in downtown Manhattan that serves as the HQ of the Federal Bureau of Control. This is a severely warped place where the natural laws of physics, space, and time do not apply, and it's one of the most interesting places I've ever explored in a game.

If you've ever watched a classic James Bond movie, you've probably admired the set designs of the late, great Ken Adam. This legendary production designer was doing such incredible work on Bond, including Dr No's Caribbean island lair, that

ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Enjoyed the twisted architecture of the Oldest House.

ALSO PLAYED
Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory

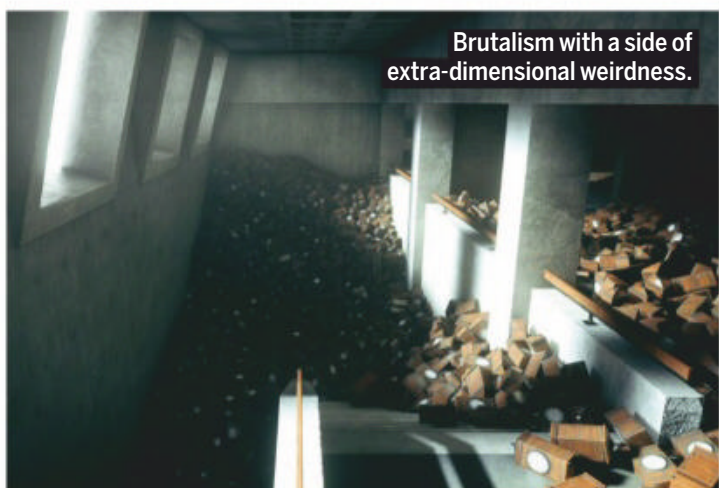
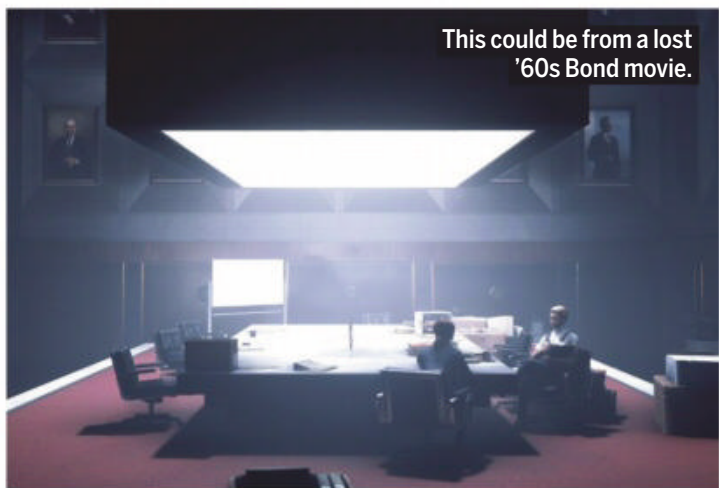
Stanley Kubrick poached him to design the war room for Cold War satire *Dr Strangelove*.

I've been a fan of Ken Adam for years, and as I was playing *Control* I couldn't help but think of his stark, modernist sets – and when I tweeted about it, I was delighted when *Control's* world design director, Stuart MacDonald, replied and confirmed that he was a fan of Adam too. He also noted that, like Adam, he's a

trained architect, which explains both artists' talent for creating interesting spaces.

The fact that the Oldest House is seemingly frozen in the 1960s, with reel-to-reel tape machines, wood panelling, and rotary phones, is part of the Ken Adam feel, because this is the era when he produced his most famous work. A document you can pick up in *Control* explains that modern technology has a habit of breaking when it enters the bureau, which of course gives Remedy an

THE OLDEST HOUSE IS A TERRIFYING, MIND-BENDING, ILLOGICAL PLACE



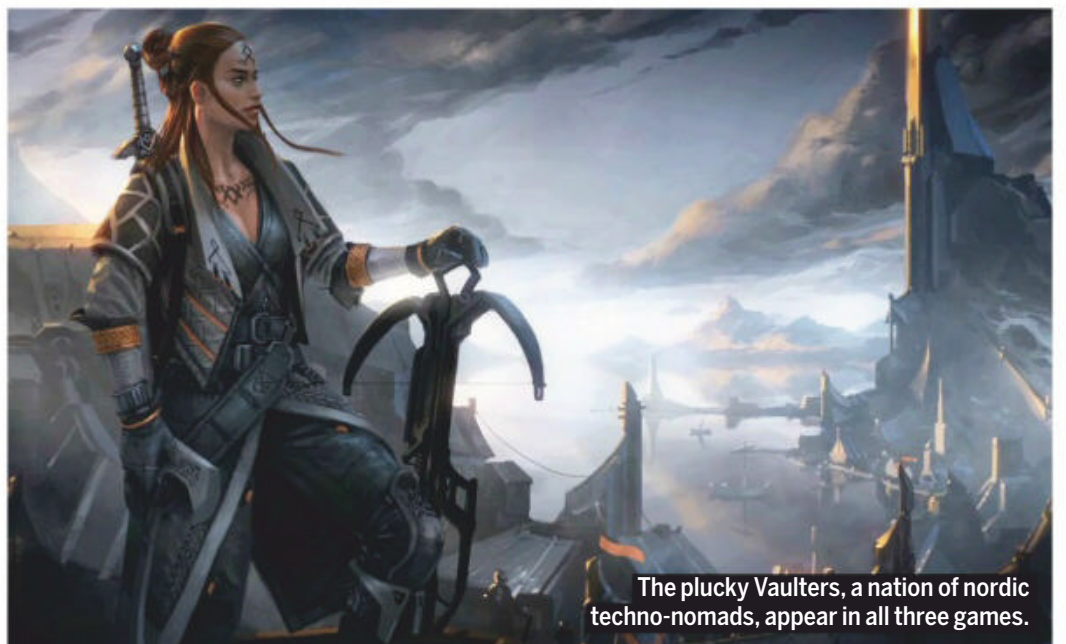
excuse to give the game a cool, retro, Mad Men aesthetic. But it goes deeper than that. Every Ken Adam set is a grand place of power. Whether it's Fort Knox in Goldfinger or Drax's space station in Moonraker, his creations are vast and dramatic. And I feel the same playing *Control*. The sprawling corridors, cavernous chambers, and brutalist architecture create a similar sense of scale.

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

The Oldest House is a terrifying, mind-bending, illogical place, and the world design reinforces this. It's unsettling too, with bodies hovering mysteriously in mid-air, rows of abandoned desks, and architecture that makes no sense.

And the fact that it's influenced by one of history's greatest production designers helps too. Videogames tapping into movies for inspiration is nothing new, but it always seems to be the same handful of sources: Blade Runner, Apocalypse Now, Heat. I'm forever seeing the same visual elements in games being pulled from a surprisingly small number of films.

So it's nice to see a game that looks a bit further afield when it comes to designing its world. It's amazing that something as weird as *Control* even exists, but I love that Remedy was given the chance to go wild creatively, otherwise I might never have gotten the opportunity to spend time in a place as beautifully bizarre as the Oldest House. ■



“All that presentation is just decoration”

Crunching the numbers in **ENDLESS LEGEND**

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Failed to balance his FIDSI production.

ALSO PLAYED
Endless Space, *Endless Space 2*

There's something intoxicating to me about Amplitude Studios' games. Its *Endless* series – three 4X games all taking place in a sprawling shared setting – are given an incredible amount of life by gorgeous art and animation, imaginative writing, and a wonderfully creative approach to crafting sci-fi and fantasy cultures.

I'm helpless before such evocative world-building. I pick up every Amplitude game on launch, and any time I see even a whisper of DLC, it's seconds before I've got it in my cart. But the truth is, I don't actually like playing any of them very much.

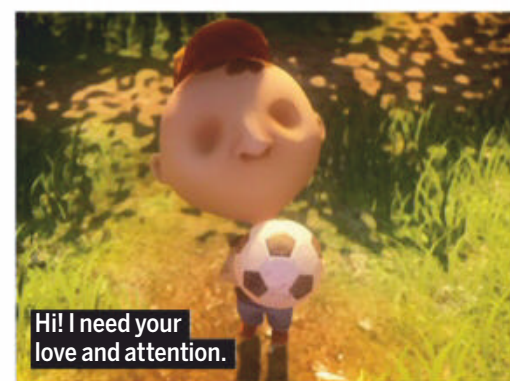
After five years of DLC and free updates, science-fantasy entry *Endless Legend* leaves me spoilt for choice when it comes to picking my empire. There's the tribal Kapaku, who seek to turn the world into a paradise... of volcanos and lava. Or the Morgawr, mutants who manipulate and corrupt lesser beings from their coastal fortresses. Or the Mykara, a fungal hive-entity that

spreads infestations instead of cities. But as I boot it up for yet another attempt to even finish a match, I know that, whichever one I choose, I'll feel just as dissatisfied as ever. The problem is, while so much of the game invites me to simply explore everything the planet Auriga has to offer – to the point that each faction even has its own story quests – at its core it's as ruthlessly mechanical a 4X as you'll come across.

NEVER-ENDING STORY

All that beautiful presentation is just decoration, really. Your empire isn't an alien culture in need of rule, it's an engine of numbers that must be tuned until it purrs a song of cold efficiency. The world isn't a playground, it's layer after layer of interlocking systems, all demanding mastery. Even on low difficulties, I find myself making decisions on turn one that are revealed to have utterly crippled my options by turn 40. Rare moments of success feel like solving a difficult equation, not leading a nation to supremacy.

It's not the game's fault – by any metric, *Endless Legend* and its siblings are all extremely finely crafted, and I'm sure to players of a more mathematical mindset they're a joy to tinker with. But they leave me cold. Frosty enough to never find the fun in them, and yet not sufficiently warned off to ever prevent me from buying in again next time, helpless to their siren song. ■



“If we can understand what happened, maybe we can move on”

Learning to let go in **THE LAST DAY OF JUNE**

Everyone is too busy to play with me, so I run from house to house kicking my football into these huge green flowerpots, laughing gleefully as they tip over. The old man who set them up is rightfully annoyed, but eventually he takes a break from his work to help me fly a kite. Then the scene fades away to a ghost-like image of the same boy in the middle of a rain-soaked road, picking up his football. The boy dissolves into the raindrops as a car passes by, and then the scene changes again. I am now the man, Carl, driving that car, abruptly waking up from a deep sleep in my living room. I look to my right and see an empty armchair. I look to my left and see my wheelchair. Then I realise my wife, June, is still dead.

In *The Last Day of June*, I try to change the past through a series of puzzles, constantly tweaking a complicated timeline of events in the hope that I can bring my deceased wife back. It's a game I've wanted to play since it came out, but like a lot of similar emotionally-charged games, I don't get around to it until there's some personal life

▶ **JOANNA NELIUS**



THIS MONTH
Attempted to change the past.

ALSO PLAYED
The Sims 4

event that calls for it; a game about love and loss is particularly cathartic for me at the moment.

By interacting with a series of paintings in your home, you travel back in time and assume the role of different characters, all of whom cross paths with you and your wife on that fateful day.

The further you progress in the game, the more complicated the puzzles become, and you see how intertwined every small, seemingly inconsequential thing really is.

Each time you wake up and discover you didn't change the present. You do this over and over again, and while it does become

EACH TIME YOU WAKE UP AND DISCOVER YOU DIDN'T CHANGE THE PRESENT

repetitive, it drives home a worthy point: trying to change the past is futile, but when we are so emotionally connected to a traumatic event, we replay it in our minds as if we'll come to some magical revelation about something we haven't figured out yet. If we can understand what happened, maybe we can move on.

OUT OF TIME

The Last Day of June is about trying to move on from that pain but chasing a tiny ray of hope that you can get back what you lost.

You see it in the bubble memories you collect as the other characters, which give you insight into their personal stories. You see it as Carl when you step out from his house and explore the neighbourhood, coming across both joyful and painful memories of the years you and your wife spent together.

Every character is tragically connected with Carl and June, and you learn about their love and loss as well. You change one sequence of events for one character, and you've changed them for the rest. It's a back-and-forth game of grief.

For Carl in particular, I understand his pain well. ■

“As an added bonus, it doles out some tasty chunks of wish fulfilment”

Joining the point and clique of the **UNAVOWED**

At the risk of encouraging you to sharpen your pitchforks, I'm a lapsed PC gamer.

Modern setups have been too expensive for me. But recently, like the responsible father and husband that I am, I decided to splash the cash anyway. Naturally the first thing I play with this tech is something that looks like it would run on an expensive calculator.

A good point-and-click game is one of the things I missed most about PC gaming. With no new *Monkey Island* or *Toonstruck* sequel on the horizon – and no machine to play them on even if there were – I resorted to trying to pick things up by pointing at them and clicking my fingers, which rarely worked. When I encountered a seemingly insurmountable problem, I would start trying to combine random objects to find a solution. Turns out you can't contest a child tax credit overpayment with a cuddly zebra and a fork.

The point is, I can now properly scratch that itch, which *Unavowed* dispels to a level of satisfaction I hadn't imagined possible. There's so

▶ **LUKE KEMP**



THIS MONTH
Used only supernatural ingredients.

ALSO PLAYED
Dear Esther, *Spec Ops: The Line*

much to love about this game, it's frankly ridiculous. The superb pixel art, the subtle and divine soundtrack, the razor-sharp script, by turns fascinating, disturbing, and hilarious. And the puzzles, which demand I pay attention to the game's world while remaining perfectly logical and fair. Yet somehow, I still haven't come to what I love about the game most.

Playing *Unavowed* for the first time is not like slipping back into a favourite pair of old trainers. It's like slipping back into a favourite pair of old trainers that somebody has cleaned, repaired, and redesigned to look cooler than ever. This is the

THERE'S SO MUCH TO LOVE ABOUT THIS GAME, IT'S QUITE FRANKLY RIDICULOUS

natural, nay, ultimate evolution of the genre. These games have always had reams of optional dialogue, but here I'm given an agency I've not seen from them before. A choice of playable characters, meaningfully branching dialogue, moral choices where the 'right' thing is never clear. God, I love this game.

ON POINT

So, it's not point-and-click as I remember it. It's better. As an added bonus, it doles out some tasty chunks of wish fulfilment. It lets me pretend I'm an actor. It also casts me as a member of a secret organisation covertly defending the world from supernatural threats.

The moment that I truly fall in love with the game is when I make my first moral choice. An accidentally-summoned demon needs dealing with. The first option is to kill it. The second is to allow it to feast on the flesh of innocent people I had slaughtered while possessed, building its strength up for a journey home. I go for option two, smiling the kind of deranged smile you usually only see on the front of tabloid newspapers. What a way to welcome me back to PC gaming. ■





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Final Fantasy XIII strikes a perfect balance for the series

Vanille and Sazh, one of the game's main duos.



FINAL FANTASY XIII

Behind the linearity lies the series' most complex cast. *By Natalie Flores*

One of the best lines in *Final Fantasy XIII* is uttered by its narrator, Oerba Dia Vanille, when she says, "Maybe we'd fall short. Maybe we'd never even come close. But someone, someday, would know we'd tried."

These days the anticipation for the *Final Fantasy VII Remake* on PS4 grows stronger with every passing day. The reception for this updated version of the most beloved *Final Fantasy* makes me think of *Final Fantasy XIII* and how its legacy has shaken out in comparison. Like *Final Fantasy VIII* (the only other instalment that can contest it for the title of the most divisive *Final Fantasy*) it took risks and, as a result, fell short of the expectations of many

fans. But it's important to know that it tried and that it resonated with many, myself included. I've played most *Final Fantasy* games, and while *Final Fantasy XIII* isn't perfect, as I give it a reinstall and dive back into it, I'm reminded why it's one of my favourites: namely, its excellent cast.

A FLAWED FAMILY

While every *Final Fantasy* has memorable characters, not every game has succeeded in developing all of them in meaningful ways. *Final Fantasy XIII* strikes a perfect balance; the cast is large enough to form a web of dynamics that continuously develop in fascinating ways, while small enough that everyone gets considerable screen time and complexity. The game's characters are its pillars, especially given its infamously tricky to follow story.

Final Fantasy XIII follows a group of six people who are branded L'Cie, beings who must serve demigods known as the Fal'Cie. Becoming L'Cie seals their fates; if they don't complete their Focus they become ghoulish husks known as Cie'ths. If they do complete their Focus, they are crystallised and can only be restored to their mortal forms under specific circumstances. Together they set out to fight the Sanctum government, which is purging L'Cie, and figure out their Focus. At the beginning the exposition dumps lore and terminology on the player without spending much time to explain it all, and this is one of its flaws. However, once you take the time to really understand them, the game rewards you with a story led by what is still the most nuanced and interesting cast in the series' history.

The game achieves this feat through constantly changing the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
December 17, 2009

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.square-enix.com



Lightning Farron, the protagonist of *Final Fantasy XIII*.



Also a game of extremely nice coats.



The main cast gathers together at a pivotal moment.

makeup of your party and having you play as everyone despite Lightning being the protagonist. It splits up specific characters whose narratives depend on each other into pairs, developing them as compelling individuals and partners in the process. Later on these duos join up to become a larger group that stands together throughout the many revelations and hardships that plague their journey. The events of the story force them to come to terms with their flaws, face the consequences of their past and present mistakes, and have the difficult conversations that

gradually change them into better, more complete people.

Lightning resembles Cloud and Squall in that she's a no-nonsense soldier who deeply struggles with emotional vulnerability. Following his mother's death, Hope is a teenage boy who gets caught up in a war he never wanted to be part of. Through his tendency of proclaiming himself as a saviour to mask his insecurities and failures, Snow is a play on the classic hero archetype. Fang is a Dagoon who wields sarcasm, cockiness, and assertiveness as expertly as her lance; a type of

character that isn't assigned to women in JRPGs often. Sazh is a kind and devoted father dedicated to saving his son and, even now, a rarity among JRPGs as a black main character who's written like a person rather than a caricature. Vanille is a subversion of the happy girl archetype, utilising a bubbly facade to mask the cynicism and darkness that lurks underneath.

It's not easy to immediately see how intimately these characters are connected to each other. But by the end, this group of wildly different individuals united only through their

FABULA FANTASY *The Fabula Nova Crystallis series titles*



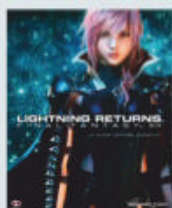
FINAL FANTASY XIII
The first game in the *XIII* trilogy, released in 2009.



FINAL FANTASY XIII-2
A direct sequel to *XIII* that was released in 2011.



FINAL FANTASY TYPE-0
Released in Japan in 2011, 2015 internationally.



LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII
The finale of the *XIII* trilogy.



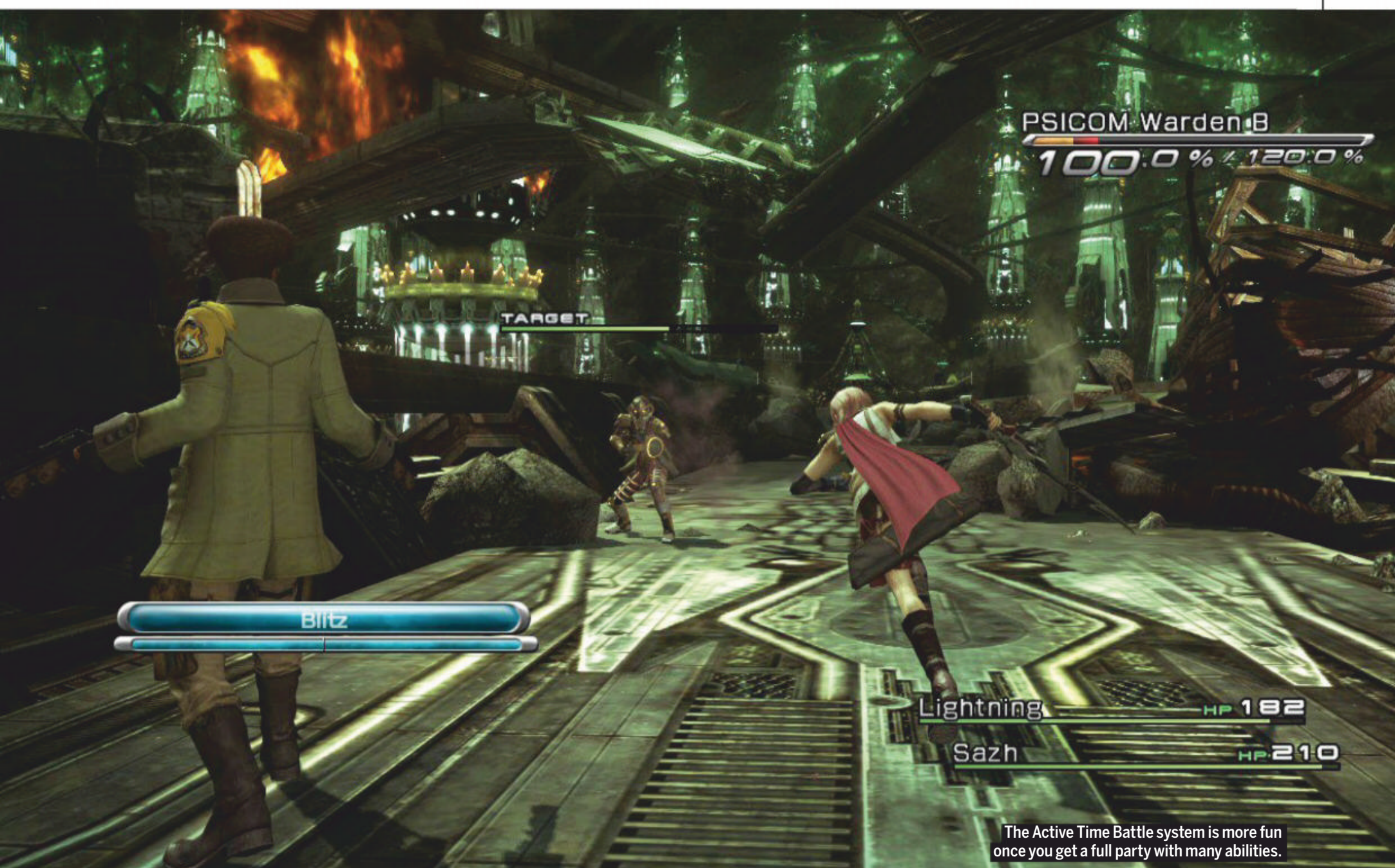
FINAL FANTASY AGITO
Set in Type-0's world, released in 2014 for Japan only.



FINAL FANTASY XV
Loosely adopts the FNC mythos from its past as *Versus XIII*.



FINAL FANTASY AWAKENING
First released in China in 2016, other regions followed.



THE SOUNDTRACK IS AS DIVERSE AS THE LOCATIONS YOU'LL TRAVEL

base mission of escaping persecution becomes a family that knows the flaws and virtues of its members.

PARADIGM SHIFTS

Next to *Final Fantasy XIII*'s linearity its most controversial aspect is the battle system. Its core concept is switching between Paradigms, specific classes you assign to each character. Every party member can access every one, but each is most well-suited to certain classes. You have a limited number of slots for Paradigms, so you have to envision various situations in advance to prepare yourself.

You might want to start a boss battle with a Commando and two Ravagers to build up and maintain a stagger percentage on them. If you're low on health after a devastating attack, you'll want to rapidly switch to a Paradigm composed of two Medics and a

Sentinel to heal up your party and enhance defences. While you'll spend a significant time using the Auto-Attack command between Paradigm shifts, different situations call for different Paradigms, so the system isn't as passive as you might assume. It requires you to think on your feet and to do so quickly.

It's strategic, but in an admittedly unorthodox way. Against challenging enemies, it can be really good fun. Just as you're not bound to playing just one character, you're not restricted in the classes you can assign to them – so if you want to make tiny 14-year-old Hope into a Sentinel who stands firm on your frontline, you can.

THE PROMISE

One thing that helps define all *Final Fantasy* games is the quality of their music. There's a reason why tickets for Distant Worlds, the *Final Fantasy* orchestra concert, often sell out as it tours venues all across the world.

While most soundtracks in the series have been primarily composed by the iconic Nobuo

Uematsu, Masashi Hamauzu takes the rein on *Final Fantasy XIII*'s.

Yet I'd go as far as to say it's the best in the entire series, with the soundtracks for *FF VIII* and *FF XIV: Shadowbringers* being the only possible contenders for that illustrious title. The soundtrack is as diverse as the locations you'll travel. Some, like *Blinded by Light*, are thrillers that trigger a surge of adrenaline that gets you on your feet in the middle of battle; some, like *The Promise*, have beautiful piano accompaniments, perfect for relaxing or studying; and some, like *Dust to Dust*, are so wistful and magical that I struggle to convey the feelings they stir in me in words.

Final Fantasy as a series is never an easy one to summarise, and that's in large part due to atypical entries like *Final Fantasy XIII*, *Final Fantasy XII*, and *Final Fantasy VIII*. While the latter two are generally remembered more fondly, it's *FF XIII* that solidified my love for the series. In being the first high-def *Final Fantasy*, it was eager to take risks that most sequels wouldn't dare commit to. Time hasn't dulled that rebellious spirit in the least. ■





HITMAN 2

Agent 47 breaks the bank, literally. *By Andy Kelly*

Golden Handshake is a new assassination mission for *Hitman 2*, taking Agent 47 to the mean streets of New York City. The level takes place in the downtown Manhattan branch of the Milton-Fitzpatrick Investment Bank – a grand, temple-like financial hub catering to the city's elite. It's the perfect setting for a *Hitman* level, with tight security, a target whose every move is shadowed by a team of guards, and IO Interactive's usual high standards of atmosphere, world-building, and architecture.

Grand Central Station seems to have at least partly inspired the bank's lavish, ostentatious architecture, with shafts of light streaming through tall glass windows. The sense of scale in the main hall, with its gleaming, polished floors, is dizzying, and I like how the old building is augmented with modern elements. Dotted around the lobby are modern metal cubes containing meeting rooms, lit by the old chandeliers above.

But the real meat of the level is found in the basement, where the vault is housed. As well as the usual assassination, 47 also has to retrieve a precious item from this vault and sneak it out of the bank. Here you can access the private lockboxes, a few of which can be lock-picked to find some interesting items. But to access

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 2018	DEVELOPER IO Interactive
PUBLISHER Warner Bros	LINK hitman.com

the room where the imposing vault door is, you'll need to disguise yourself as an elite security guard and find a keycard. And even then there are more steps required to get into the vault – I won't spoil them.

On the upper floors of the bank you'll find a bustling stock exchange with stressed investment bankers shouting into telephones, ordering people to buy or sell. The grease-stained, half-filled pizza boxes scattered around here are a nice touch too. Climb another floor and you'll find the office of the bank's director, the cruel and unscrupulous Athena Savalas. One of the best mission stories in *Golden Handshake* involves 47 posing as a worker who has an appointment to be theatrically fired by the cold-hearted director.

Savalas' office is one of the highlights of the map, looking like something you'd see in a Bond villain's lair. A massive glass clock overlooks the main hall of the bank, and her office is located behind it. You can imagine her standing there, watching the staff below, making sure the business is running smoothly. When 47 turns up for his firing, if you choose that particular route, it's a

genuinely intimidating place. But, well, the clock is made of glass, and there's a drop below, and... you know what I'm getting at.

It wouldn't be a *Hitman* level if it didn't give you a satisfyingly brutal way to kill a horrible person. Don't feel bad, she deserves it.

The bank is something of a curio compared to *Hitman 2*'s other levels, however. It's smaller than usual, which initially disappointed me, but after completing it a couple of times I realised that this is actually one of its strong points. In the bigger maps there's a luxury of space – large, unpatrolled areas where you can sneak, explore, and observe without being hassled. But because the bank is so tight and confined, you always feel on edge, under scrutiny, on the verge of being spotted – even when you've found a high-level disguise. That gives it a really interesting energy, and makes the bank feel



47 ALSO HAS TO RETRIEVE A PRECIOUS ITEM FROM THIS VAULT

appropriately secure. This place should be a challenge.

HE NEVER HURT NOBODY

The map is full of personality and detail, like the glimpses of New York you catch through the rain-splattered windows, or the nerdy posters pinned up in the IT department. I love the depth of detail in IO's environments and it's always a delight to explore the places these artists build. Their brilliance lies not only in creating a palpable sense of place, and a memorable aesthetic, but in building levels that interplay beautifully with the game's systems, opening up countless possibilities.

Honestly I'd be happy if IO just kept releasing new levels forever. If this new era of *Hitman* became an ongoing service instead of a series with numbered sequels, I'd be into it. *Hitman 2* is one of the best stealth games on PC, and now it joins the likes of *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, and *Thief 2* in the pantheon of games with classic bank levels. Seriously, if you're making a stealth game, put a bank in it, and let me rob that bank. ■

CASH MONEY *Other brilliant bank levels*



DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED
Prague's Palisade Bank is protected by a network of laser grids, armed guards, turrets, and security cameras.



SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY
Sam Fisher infiltrates the Banco de Panama, which is swarming with guards and fortified with advanced systems.



DISHONORED: DEATH OF THE OUTSIDER
Hero Billie Lurk breaks into a bank to steal a blade that has the power to kill the Outsider.



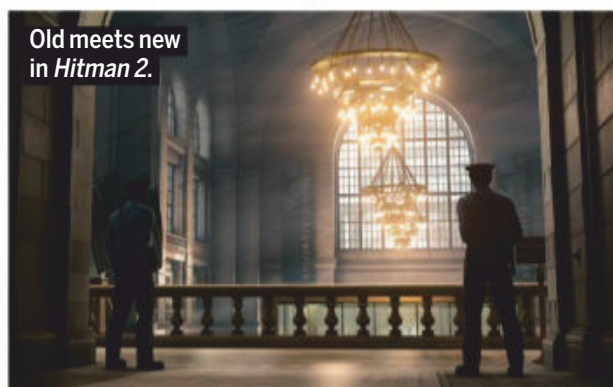
GRAND THEFT AUTO IV
Three Leaf Clover, in which Niko and his crew rob a downtown bank, is one of the toughest missions in *GTA IV*.



Hey Savalas?
Where's your Telly?



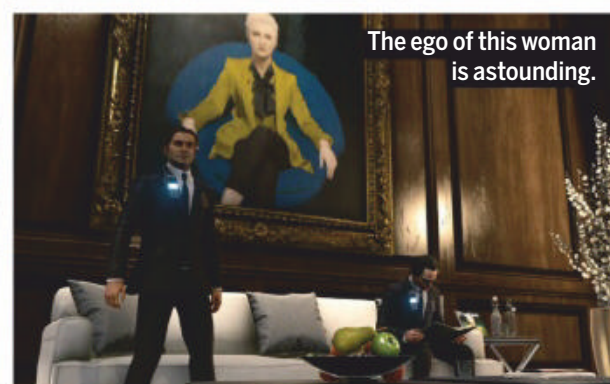
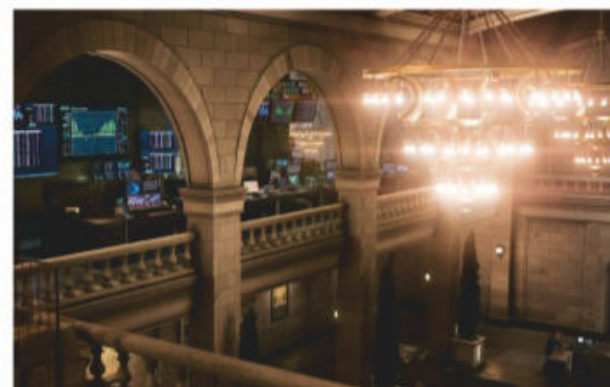
Buy low! Sell high!
Eat pizza!



Old meets new
in *Hitman 2*.



Tooled up, 47 is ready for
the bank heist.



The ego of this woman
is astounding.



FIND A RAID GROUP

Assemble a top squad for the toughest battles on PC. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

TIME
Variable

VITAL LINKS
Destiny 2 LFG:
bit.ly/2kWjLgI
The Division 2 LFG:
bit.ly/2kK7ewG
Fallout 76 LFG:
bit.ly/2kmNe2K



LEARN THE ROPES

1 Make sure you're actually ready to raid first. These are endgame fights, after all, so ensure you've taken the time to get to grips with the game's meta, the intricacies of your class, and acquired appropriately-levelled gear.



TANK YOU

2 Tanks and healers do hard, often thankless, work, so fewer players pick them. Pick a less-common role to make yourself as attractive as possible to raid groups looking to expand. Just make sure you're ready to handle the pressure.



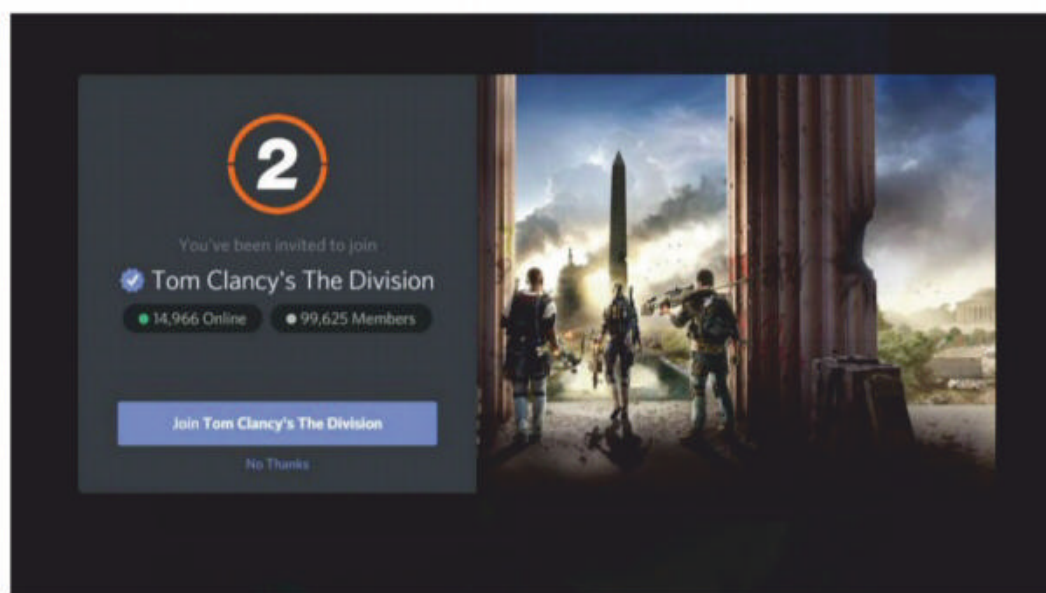
DO YOUR RESEARCH

3 Provided you're not tackling an instance on release, bone up on the raid you want to play, and your role. Watch videos, read guides, and be ready for anything. Your future teammates will surely thank you for it.



OSCAR MIC

4 Invest in a reliable headset and mic. A decent pair of cans will alert you to in-game threats and let you raid late into the night without disturbing the rest of your street. A microphone is essential for co-ordinated teamplay.

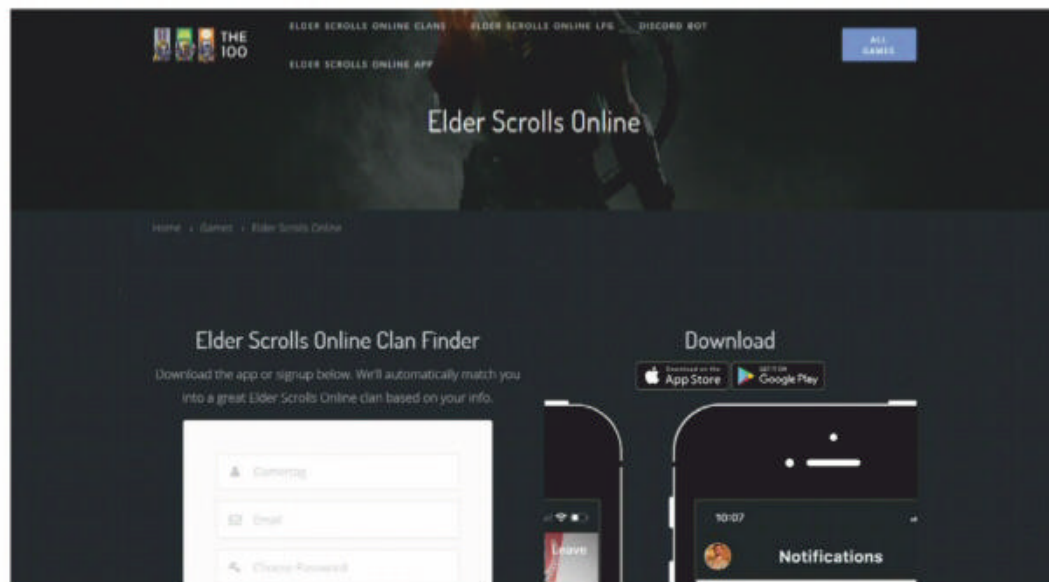


JOIN DISCORD SERVERS

5 Not only is joining the official Discord server a great way to find an endgame-bashing dream team, but they're full of like-minded people collectively indulging their love of the game.

LFG SITES

6 'Looking For Group' sites are specifically intended to connect raid groups with keen new starters. After a quick sign up process, detail the mission you want to play and your character. Game-related phone apps are also available.



TRY MATCHMAKING

7 Games like *The Division 2* don't offer matchmaking as randoms are seldom organised enough to succeed. Some games, such as *Destiny 2* with its Guided Games feature, do, so try it, be proactive, and contact the better folk you encounter.

GREEN THUMBS *Destiny 2's Shadowkeep expansion brings with it a new raid, the Garden of Salvation*



IN THE SHADOWS

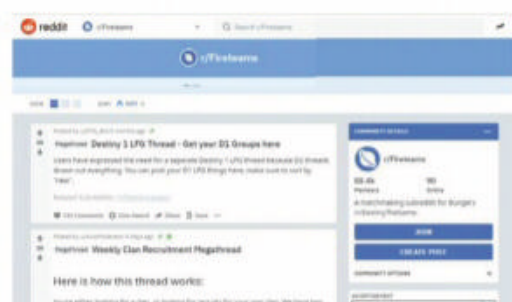
The raid is available now for anyone with the *Shadowkeep* DLC – now's the time to team up.

GARDEN WARFARE

It takes Guardians back to the Black Garden, the staging ground for the original *Destiny*'s final mission.

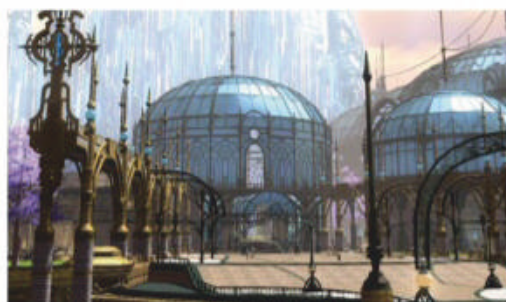
GROUP EFFORT

Destiny's elaborate raids are like nothing else in the game. They're well worth putting together a team to see.



ASK REDDIT

8 Like Discord, game-specific subreddits are full of people searching for a raid team or that last piece of the dungeon-crawling puzzle. Making connections in subreddits like r/Fireteams for *Destiny* raids are their USP.



FIND BUSY SPOTS

9 Politely asking who wants to raid on a quiet night in the Barrens won't do the trick. Hang out in thriving hub areas to maximise your chances of meeting someone new. Lingering outside raid entrances is a good bet, too.



CHATTERBOX

10 Are players in busy hub areas looking straight through you, even as you desperately hammer the wave emote? Don't be disheartened, drop a message in the in-game chat and see if anyone else out there is in the mood for a raid.



START YOUR OWN

11 Not found the right group for you? Then you can found your own clan or guild that fits with how casual you are and the hours you can play. There's bound to be plenty of others like you looking for their new virtual home.



INDOCTRINATE YOUR FRIENDS

12 Now here's the time to practice your sales pitch. If online friendships aren't blooming, persuade your real-life mates to get in on the action. Who knows, they might even know others who can bulk out your group.

AFTER ACTION REPORT



CIVILIZATION VI BATTLE ROYALE

Six men enter, one man leaves in the *Red Death* update

How do you cram battle royale into *Civilization VI*? Easy: just remove all the civilisations. No cities, no civ-building, just military units rolling around a post-apocalyptic map as a deadly circle of radiation closes in. Six of us clashed (when we could actually find each other on the map) in *Civ VI*'s new battle royale mode, *Red Death*.



RIGHT: Protect your civilians: they can't fight for themselves.





Chris: I've played four hours of *Civ IV*, eight hours of *Civ V*, and zero hours of *Civ VI*. I think the odds were stacked against me going into *Red Death*. But I do like battle royale, and a turn-based *Civ* BR is an interesting if weird idea. The max player count is 12, but you can play on maps small enough for only two players as well.

Tyler: I didn't hate it. To briefly explain how it works: you land on the map with a defenceless civilian (it's game over if they're captured by an enemy unit) plus a machine gunner and an infantry unit, and then do battle royale stuff during simultaneous turns (there's a timer so that no one takes too long). You loot cities to get new units, go after supply drops, fight NPC raiders, and eventually fight each other. I found a helicopter, which was good, because the infantry units are painfully slow, moving only a space or two per turn.

Phil: I wish I'd found a helicopter. I spawned in a hilly region, which meant all of my units were stuck moving one hex per turn. Even taking simultaneous turns, I'm going nowhere, and slowly.

Chris: The helicopter is great because of its range, though it feels pretty weak as a fighting unit. Tyler's chopper was getting shot to pieces by some AI grunt with a pistol, which seems absurd. More absurd, the chopper can't fly over water. Like every other unit, it has to transform into a boat to cross a river, which gives it a movement penalty and means it starts taking damage. Did we mention all the water is acid? All the water on the map is acid. Don't go in the water.

Tyler: I didn't go into the water due to it being acid.

Jarred: I really wish I had paid better attention to the instructions before getting started. As in, I wish I had read any instructions. I've played a fair amount of *Civ* over the years (and nearly bombed out of university my freshman year thanks to *Civ II*), but the civilian unit looked deceptively like an APC. I found a city with mine, then moved east and found Tyler. He stepped on my civvie

CHRIS LIVINGSTON



I hadn't played *Civilization VI* before, and this wasn't the best way to start.

TYLER WILDE



I've played around 50 hours of *Civilization VI*, and this was something else entirely.

JARRED WALTON



I've played every *Civilization* since the first one, and perhaps went in a bit cocky.

ANDY CHALK



I've played a lot of *Civ I* and *II*. This was my first shot at *Civ VI* and I don't think it counts.

PHIL SAVAGE



I've played lots of *Civ V*. I've played some popular battle royales. Neither helped.

and I got dropped to the game over menu like a bad habit. RIP me.

Andy: There really needs to be popups or something. I think *Civ* veterans might actually be at a disadvantage at first, because they'll come into it with preconceived ideas about cities and territories and interacting with other factions, and none of that stuff matters. It's Scavenger Hunt Battle Chess.

Phil: It's weird which bits of *Civ* they've kept. Most of my game was slowly moving between cities – loot boxes – and being awarded things that weren't helicopters. The rest of it was spent fighting lone units of AI raiders that wander the wasteland. Those raiders also have camps, but there's no way I was risking my handful of units to attack them. Although maybe if I had things would have gone better for me.

Chris: I only entered one loot box city and it gave me XP, which can be used to promote your units. There's a small skill tree – very small, because this is battle royale and there's not much time – so you can add a few skills that give them buffs in combat, better movement or the ability to see one hex further into the fog of war, and things like that. I didn't last long enough to promote anyone.

Phil: In my long and fruitless travels I'd found *three* civilian units, which isn't particularly helpful when you don't have enough troops to protect them. Things were looking bad, and got worse when I finally ran into another player. Andy's army seemed weak at first, but I'd misjudged how many units he had behind the fog of war. I weakened him significantly, but he wiped out my military entirely. I retreated with my three civilians, but each is unceremoniously captured by raider forces from the camp I hadn't thought worth clearing. There's no ceremony in losing – in having your civilians captured. I'm just out of the game.

Andy: I really didn't know what to do when I ran into Phil. I'm normally fairly cautious in these matters but things seemed to be happening quickly and I didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to at least shoot at somebody. I hurled my nearest unit at his nearest unit, then repeated until he went away. I won! I guess? There's not a lot of feedback from combat encounters. In hindsight I wish I'd pursued him more aggressively, but I was so excited about taking the city he was in that I forgot it was empty and worthless, and that there was actually no point in trying to hold it.

RIGHT: When the circle closes to just a tiny safe area, the fun really begins.



» **Tyler:** I had a similar experience. It was exciting when I finally found another player, but we scampered away from each other after a helicopter skirmish. We both knew that, if we were evenly-matched, the winner would be left too weakened to compete with the other players. So we just went back to raiding cities for more units. But after stealing Jarred's civilian, I did find a nuke. That did turn the tide a bit.

Jarred: When I get knocked out early in a battle royale game it's often fun to watch what happens with the person that killed you. *Red Death* doesn't currently support that, and I can see why – the potential for cheating in a slower paced BR like *Red Death* is a concern – but it needs to be an option. Thankfully Tyler started up his own stream on Discord for those of us who were dead, so I didn't feel entirely left out.

Andy: It felt very Early Access to me. Very little information on units or combat, the cities are just single-use loot crates, and the lack of any way to follow along with the action after being knocked out is a big downside. If it weren't for Tyler's Discord stream I would've tuned out immediately.

Jarred: That nuke was hilarious to watch, since it wasn't pointed at me. Sorry James [Davenport], we laughed at your pain. I'm not quite sure how units survive a direct nuclear blast, but at least the radiation left behind killed off any survivors before they could run away. I'm concerned the first person to find a nuke will often win, however. Is there anything more OP than a nuke?

Andy: The nuke was the highlight of the night. I'm glad Tyler found it. And used it.

Chris: And yet it's a bit disappointing that the nuke doesn't insta-kill any unit it hits, if they're at full health. I mean, it's a nuke. The effects are great, and even when you survive you need to get out of the irradiated zone as fast as you can, but

still. How did the world of *Red Death* get in such bad shape with such weak-ass nukes?

Tyler: I think most of the players were killed by NPCs and the environment. It's a battle royale game where your competitors can die before anyone sees them, which is a bit weird. After I nuked James' army and then cleaned up with my rocket artillery, it wasn't me who finished him off. His civilian was boating around on its own when it died.

Chris: The water is acid. Don't go in the water.

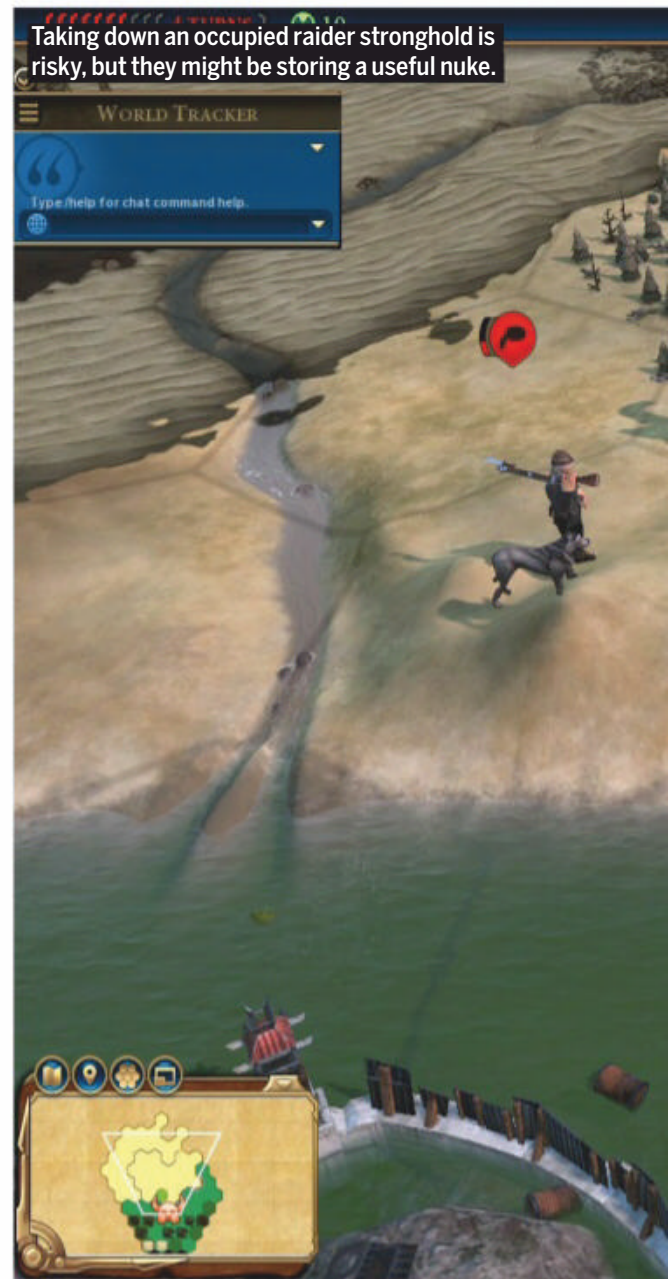
Andy: I was taken completely by surprise by an AI raider. Not that I was in great shape at that point, but I had a couple of full-strength combat units, and I was well distant from the Tyler and James Show – far enough away that I probably could have waited them out and then made the survivor come looking for me.

THAT NUKE WAS HILARIOUS TO WATCH, SINCE IT WASN'T POINTED AT ME

Instead the game just suddenly ended. I had no idea why until Phil explained that I'd probably let a raider get too close to my civilian.

Chris: The same thing happened to me. I hadn't assigned a military unit to escort my civilian because I was spreading everyone out to explore more turf, so it just got nabbed by a raider when I wasn't looking. Luckily, I'm used to getting knocked out of battle royale matches early, so it felt pretty natural.

Andy: I'd like to try it again. The first half of our match was consumed by confusion, and by the time we had any sort of handle on what was going on, half of us were wiped out. I'm still not sold on the idea of *Civilization* battle royale, but there was enough to it that at least a few more rounds are called for. Just make sure everyone playing is streaming on



LEFT: Goths, mutants, cultists, and pirates are all that's left.





Discord in future games, so we can enjoy all the nuke strikes from multiple perspectives.

Chris: I've played a few more times against AI opponents, and while I still find the early game a bit slow, it gets much more fun when the Red Death has shrunk the map until it's just a handful of safe hexes and there are a few teams left all trying to scoot around and fight in such a small area. It gets pretty hairy when everyone is bumping up against everyone else and there's nowhere to run. And that turn-based closing circle really does sneak up on you if you're not careful.

Jarred: I don't think any of us looked at the bonuses the different factions get before we started, but there are some good ones, like irradiated pirates who don't take as much damage while they're in the acid water and a cult that is physically blind but has +3 vision through the fog of war. There are also mad scientists whose units heal quickly, saving you from having to rest and repair as often. It's a fun group of wasteland factions I honestly wouldn't mind learning more about.

Tyler: I will play again. Sure it was mostly boring unit-pushing as I went in search of cities to raid, but it's so weird that I feel like I need to explore all of its possibilities. ■



RIGHT: Nukes not only put a big hurt on anyone caught in the blast, but irradiate the area for several turns.



SLAY THE SPIRE

Play as a slime, snecko or a farmer. *By Christopher Livingston*

Before *Slay the Spire* even left Early Access, it was already a hit. And it's easy to see why – Mega Crit Games crafted an engrossing and exciting deck builder and roguelike dungeon crawler that's immediately accessible to new players yet has the depth to satisfy card game veterans. The blend of genres matched with elegant and satisfying deck-building possibilities makes *Slay the Spire* an almost infinitely replayable experience.

But why stop at infinite when you go even further? Modders have been busy adding new characters, cards, relics, potions, and even completely



YOUR SLIME CHARACTER CAN BUILD A DECK WITH THE SAME POWERS THE SLIME ENEMIES HAVE

new rulesets to *Slay the Spire*, and mods run the gamut with everything from poker rules to Sailor Moon to playable monsters to farming. Yes, you can really play *Slay the Spire* as a farmer. Thanks to the Steam Workshop, mod installation is done with the simple click of a button, so there's no excuse not to try some of these next time you play. (Unless, of course, you're playing on Xbox Game Pass, which unfortunately doesn't offer mod support.)

HE SLIMED ME

There are a lot of cool character mods, many of them coming from unexpected inspirations. For example, one of my least-favourite enemies in *Slay the Spire* are slimes. When you've taken them below

half-health, they split, and each of the two slime-halves have the same health as the original before it divided. Knock down their health and they'll split again, redoubling the amount of slimes you have to face. It's not always terrible – forcing a Slime Boss to split before he unleashes his slam attack will save you from the immense damage. But typically, having an enemy dividing into a bunch of copies of itself can make for a long, drawn-out fight.

What's great about the *Slimebound* mod is it gives you the chance to play as a slime yourself. Your rogue blob has decided to not simply sit and wait for adventurers to wander in. Instead it wants to conquer the Spire for itself. Your slime character can build a deck with the same powers the slime enemies have, from goop sprays to corrosive spit, and even the fearsome slime crush. And yes, you can split just like an enemy slime does, giving you multiple characters to fight and defend with. You can even find additional gooey friends and add them to your team, and at the end of a round you can re-absorb them to boost your health. There are 75 new cards added and lots of enjoyable original art in the *Slimebound* mod, and it's so well made it feels like it could easily be a part of the original game.

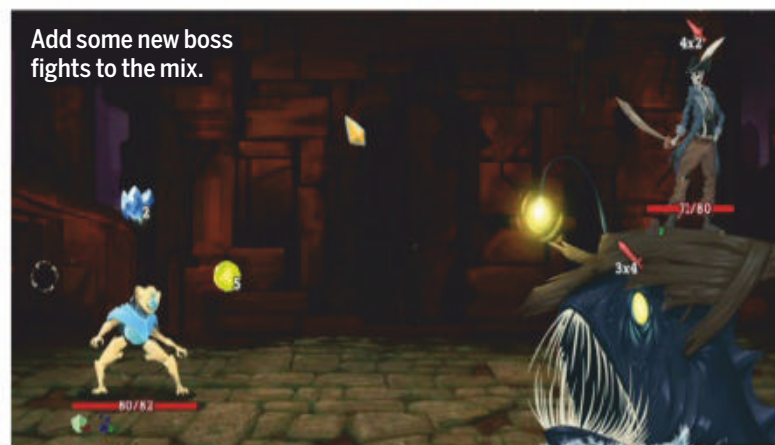
It's hard to resist being the Snek. It's those eyes.

The Snek

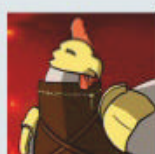
HP: 50/50 Gold: 99

Snecko? SNECKO!

Add some new boss fights to the mix.



MINI MODS *These mods don't change much, but they're still great*



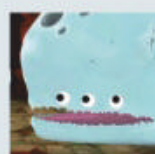
THE IRONCLUCK

Turns the Ironclad into a chicken. Because why not?



HIGHLIGHT PATHS

Lets you mark your map so you know which way to go.



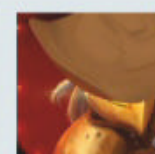
GOOGLY EYES

Puts comical googly eyes on everyone, even cards. Hilarity!



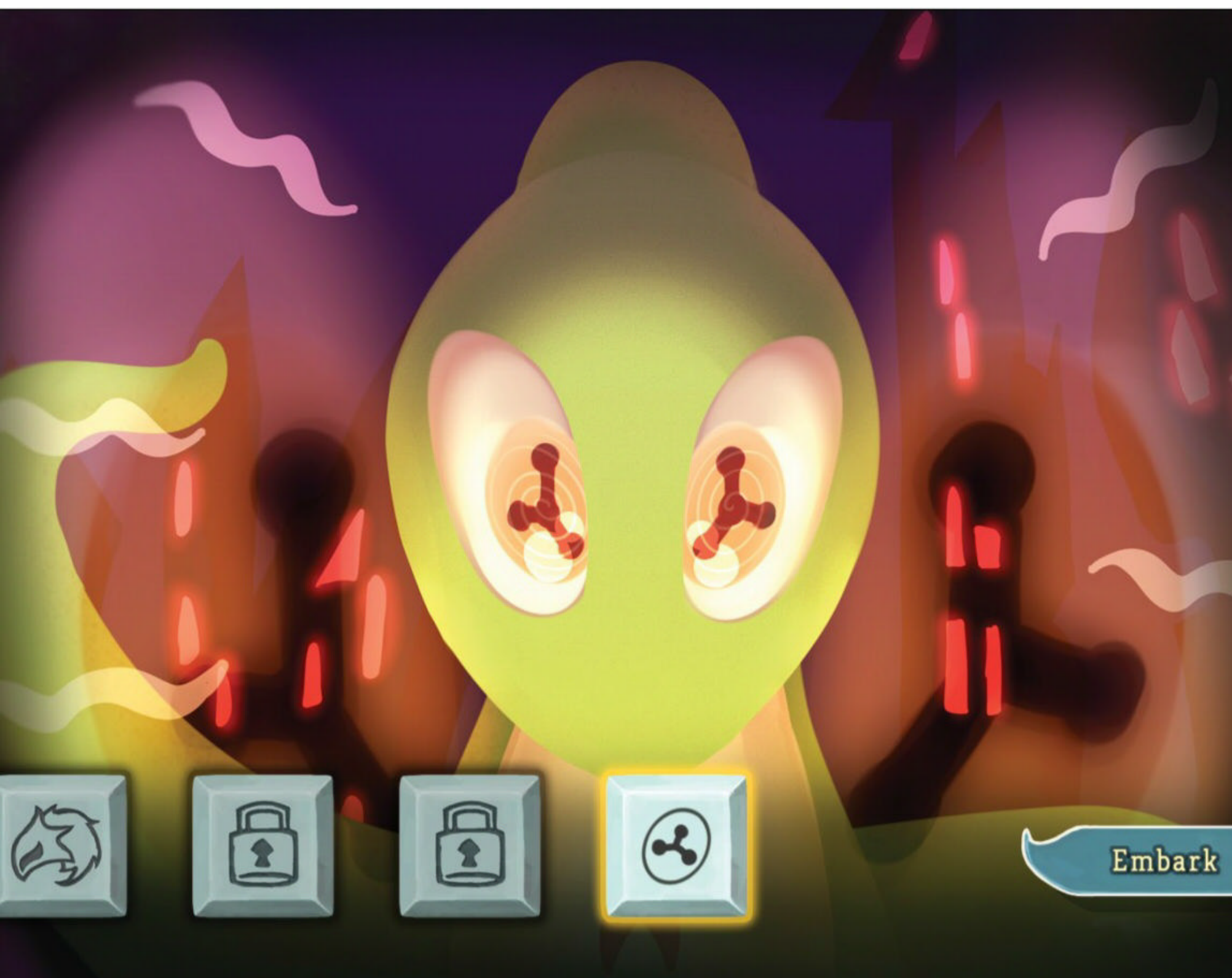
RANDOM CHARACTER

To indecisive to pick a character? This does it for you.



COWBOY HAT

Just adds a cowboy hat to the Ironclad. Again, why not?



Slimes aren't the only *Slay the Spire* monsters you can play as. *The Playable Snecko* mod lets you crawl through the dungeons as, well, the Snecko, one of *Slay the Spire*'s act 2 monsters. If you've faced one before, you know it uses Perplexing Gaze, which causes confusion – the effect that randomises the cost of cards in your deck. When you play as the Snecko you begin with a relic which confers permanent confusion. Never knowing how much a card will cost adds a bit more RNG to the already heaping mounds of RNG in *Slay the Spire*, making it a fun and incredibly tricky way to play.

Playable Snecko also gives you a Snecko Soul relic that adds six unknown, transforming cards to your deck, meaning your hand will be full of surprises in every round of combat. It's a great mod and a good way to shake up your game.

If you want a familiar face – or at least a familiar mask – in your next round, *The Bug Knight* mod should delight you. It adds the character from the outstanding metroidvania *Hollow Knight* as a playable class, and close to a hundred beautifully illustrated and well-designed cards. *The Bug Knight* has its own custom resources, called Soul and Void, and your knight might even change appearance if you build some specialised decks, which is just a brilliant touch as well.

POKER FACE

If you're a fan of another type of card game, you'll enjoy *The Poker Player* mod. This mod doesn't just add a

new hero, cards, and relics, but an entirely new ruleset governed by the immutable laws of poker. *The Poker Player* adds 40 standard playing cards with suits (clubs, spades, hearts, and diamonds) and ranks (one to ten).

Rather than trying to use your best cards in any given round as in vanilla *Slay the Spire*, you're trying to save them up to create poker hands. You play your best poker hand at the end of your turn, all at once, which is called the Showdown.

The poker hands are ranked – pair, two pair, three of a kind, straight (sequential cards), flush (all cards of the same suit), full house, four of a kind, and straight flush. Each poker card costs one energy, so you can discard the ones you don't want,



THE HAYSEED MOD ADDS A CHARACTER WHOSE ABILITIES CENTRE AROUND CROPS

which are replaced with fresh cards until you've run out of energy – or if you've been dealt a good hand, you can skip straight to the Showdown. There's strategy, too, because each suit has a specific buff: diamonds will deal damage to the enemy with the least amount of HP, for example, and spades give you points to your block. Cards are upgradable, too, so you can turn a four of clubs into a five of clubs if you haven't found one yet.

Many of the vanilla *Slay the Spire* cards are deactivated when you use *The Poker Player* mod, which feels weird until you realise they'd just get in the way, taking up room in your deck and preventing you from putting together an effective five-card poker hand. But there are custom specialty cards added, too, like those that let you draw cards of a certain suit or peek at your deck to see what's coming next. If you love poker and deck builders, this is a creatively made and extremely fun mod to try.

GROWING CARDS

As you'd expect there are plenty of anime mods – *The Senshi* mod adds Sailor Moon to the mix, for example – but it's hard to look through the Steam Workshop and not find yourself curious about a mod that adds a farming system. I'm not sure why a farmer would try to conquer the Spire, but just because he's got a pitchfork instead of a sword and overalls instead of armour doesn't

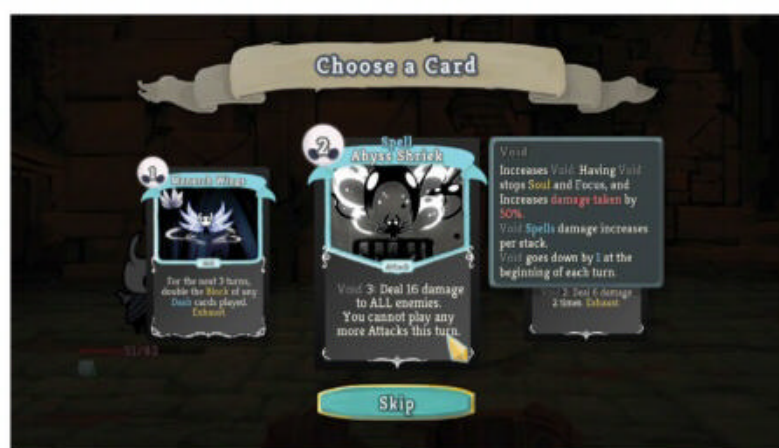
mean he can't try. *The Hayseed* mod adds a character whose abilities centre around planting and cultivating crops. You'll plant different crops like potatoes and squash – they'll hover around your head like The Defect's orbs – and once they've matured you can harvest them for different effects. *The Hayseed* mod even brings seasons to *Slay the Spire*, which can result in different types of crops and seasonal events. The custom card artwork, along with the overall concept, is exceptionally creative.

And even if you're not looking for wild, drastic changes like farming and poker, there are still mods that add new options while letting you retain the essence of vanilla *Slay the Spire*. *Replay the Spire* doesn't alter the rules or make you grow vegetables, but it does add tons of new stuff on top of the existing game, including over 70 custom cards, more than 60 new relics, plus additional rooms, bosses, and events. It's bursting with fresh surprises for your next few hundred runs, and it's got a sharp sense of humour with custom relics like baseballs, lightbulbs, and even anti-virus software.

And just for fun, why not throw in the occasional treasure chest that may decide to take a bite out of you when you open its lid? *Mimic Mod* turns those treasure rooms and question marks on the map into a random chance for danger, because you may discover a chest full of loot is in fact a ravenous monster. It's an additional challenge, sure, but mimics feel right at home in the dungeons of *Slay the Spire*. There's even a new Mad Mimicry card to use against them, which lets you duplicate a random card in your hand. Hope it's a good one. You'll need it.

Head to the Steam Workshop to find any of the mods I've listed – just type their names into the search bar and they'll pop up for you to subscribe to, as long as you're logged in. To get these mods running you'll also need to install a couple of utilities – don't worry, though, they're a snap. The first is Basemod, an open-source API that adds a dev console and new cards, relics, monsters, and characters to be added. The second utility is ModTheSpire, which is a mod loader – when you play *Slay the Spire* with mods, you'll just need to tick the box next to the mod you want to use, and untick any you'd like to disable. Luckily, you can simply subscribe to both of these utilities in the Steam Workshop, and the next time you start the game, they'll be ready and waiting. ■

SHOP SMART How does Slay the Spire's shopkeeper stack up against Spelunky's?		
	SLAY THE SPIRE	SPELUNKY
Has potions	✓	✗
Sells jetpacks	✗	✓
Gambling?	✗	✓
Often shows up before you have real money	✓	✓
Points creepily	✓✓✓	✗
Might kill you	✗	✓✓✓





DIARY

HITMAN LOTTO

PART III

Agent 47 goes on a murder party in Colorado, before embarking upon his toughest mission yet.

By Rick Lane

THE RULES

1 Weapons chosen via a lotto spinner.

2 One weapon per target.

3 No reloads except upon death.

No time to beat around the bush. Agent 47 has his work cut out for him. We're assassinating targets in *Hitman* using a lotto spinner to choose our weapons. This time, we start at an unsanctioned militia training ground in rural Colorado, where there are a whopping four targets waiting for their unlucky numbers to come up. This includes militia leader Sean Rose and his three lieutenants: Ezra Berg, Penelope Graves, and Maya Parvati.

Agent 47 infiltrates the area through the undergrowth just outside the perimeter fence. I spin the wheel and out rolls an eclectic arsenal. Ezra Berg gets number 20 – fiber wire. Graves gets 3 – a shotgun. Parvati gets 2 – a silenced pistol. And Sean Rose gets 8 – an axe.

As well as being the least glamorous of 47's many murder-holidays, Colorado is also a hostile area from the start. I slip through the perimeter fence and find myself a basic militia disguise, hiding the knocked-out guard in a conveniently placed dumpster.

Able to wander freely, I plan my approach. I decide that I'll tackle Graves last, since a shotgun blast will stir the hive like a bear pawing for honey. Parvati will also have to be handled later, as she hangs around quite a public area.

Hence, it's either Berg or Rose first. I settle on Rose, as I know how to get rid of him fairly easily, via one of my favourite mission stories in the entire game. Rose, you see, suffers from OCD, and you can isolate him from his security by triggering it. It's a particularly evil and insidious method, but also satisfying in its subtlety.

First though, I need to find an axe. Colorado is a messy level, so I use the online *Hitman* interactive map to pin down the axe's location. It's embedded in a tree-stump in the far corner of the map. I pick it up with little difficulty, and on the way find a shotgun. You practically can't take a

step without falling over a gun in Colorado (just like real life!). I already started with a silenced pistol and fiber wire, so I'm now almost completely tooled up for the mission. But I need one more item. Returning to the main house where Rose normally hangs around, I pick up a special hallucinogenic drug – used by Ezra Berg in his twisted interrogations – which I need to eliminate Rose.

I skulk around the back of the house, using the drug to spike the cigarettes Rose habitually smokes. I then try to get into the main house, but the guards are Rose's personal retinue, and won't let in the regular cannon-fodder. I sneak around the security checkpoint to the side of the house, where one of Rose's men hangs around near a crate perfect for hiding bodies inside.

I knock him out and steal his clothes, but I'm caught in the act by another nearby guard. I pull out my silenced

pistol and empty a clip into him before he can raise the alarm. A stupid slip up, and I also have to kill the unconscious guard as he apparently counts as a witness. Still, it could have gone a lot worse. I steal a uniform and hide both bodies in the container.

Heading into the house, I tamper with the clock

and misalign the pencils on Sean Rose's desk, then exit to the rear and await his arrival. A few minutes later he approaches, disturbed by his skewed stationary. The spiked cigarettes further elevate his panic (this really is a nasty way to kill someone) and he rushes into the toolshed to calm down. I help release some of the tension by slicing open his throat with the axe.

TIP OF THE ICED BERG

One down, three to go. I dump the body and head outside, running almost immediately into the masked face of Ezra Berg. I follow him around the house toward the outdoor entrance of the basement. I realise that, in doing so, we're crossing through the area I cleared of guards earlier. Acting on impulse, I pull out the fiber wire and strangle Berg right there in the open.

It's a huge gamble, but nobody notices. However I'd forgotten that I disposed of two guards in the nearby body container, filling it up. Consequently, I'm dragging around one of Rose's dead lieutenants in an area swarming with guards with nowhere to put the body.

Eventually I realise there's another body container just behind the main doors of the house. But between me and it is a security camera. Leaving the body on the patio, I head inside the house, disable the security system, and then head back outside. I drag the body right past the main security checkpoint, into the house where there are at least a dozen guards, and somehow dump it in the container without anybody noticing.

Berg down. Parvati next. The former Tamil Tiger captain is heading some sort of spec-ops training regime, making her difficult

I TAMPER WITH THE CLOCK AND MISALIGN THE PENCILS ON SEAN ROSE'S DESK





» to isolate. However, as I shadow her patrol, I notice she briefly diverts from her training to have a discussion with a mechanic near a couple of large garages. I figure if I need to kill her with a straight shot, this is definitely the best place.

At first I consider shooting her from inside the garage, through an open window. But there's a guard patrol that runs right behind me. So I instead stand between the two garages and take the shot at a diagonal angle, instantly moving away from the scene once the shot is taken. It works, my identity isn't compromised and the kill sticks.

Now for the big one. Graves' patrol takes her through most of the compound, flanked at all times by two security guards. The only time she isn't escorted is when she's inside the main house. After watching her make her rounds, I notice there's a brief moment where she stops to examine the grandfather clock I tampered with to kill Rose. Adjacent to this is a door leading to the militia's server room. In theory I can stand in there and shoot her. Everyone will hear the shot, but nobody will see it. Er, in theory.

I let Graves take one last tour of the grounds. When she returns to look at the clock again, I take the shot. *Blam.* I rush to the end of the room and hide behind a stack of crates moments before a swarm of militia pile into the room. My status reads "hunted" which means if they see me, they'll shoot on sight, and at one point a guard stands so close I'm sure it's game over. Somehow though, they don't notice me, and I'm able to complete

WHOLE LOTTO LOVE

Give Hitman Bingo a try

If you want to try out *Hitman* lotto, you'll need two things, a lotto spinner (or a 20-sided die) and this list.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Pistol (unsilenced) | 11. Fire Extinguisher |
| 2. Pistol (silenced) | 12. Propane Flask |
| 3. Shotgun | 13. Remote Explosive |
| 4. Automatic | 14. Poison |
| 5. Sniper Rifle | 15. Crushing |
| 6. Knife | 16. Falling |
| 7. Sword | 17. Drowning |
| 8. Axe | 18. Electrocution |
| 9. Cleaver | 19. Other Environmental |
| 10. Tool (scissors, screwdriver etc) | 20. Fiber Wire |

the mission without any further noisy incidents.

SUSHI GONE

Hokkaido, Japan. The last and trickiest of the original *Hitman* levels. My targets are ICA defector Erich Soders and Yuki Yamazaki, a former lawyer to the Yakuza. Soders is undergoing a heart transplant at a high-tech and even higher security clinic in the Hokkaido mountains. It's so tightly controlled that I can't smuggle anything into the building, which means no sniper rifle, fiber wire, or silenced pistol can be used for this mission.

Nonetheless, I spin the wheel. The numbers that come up are 6 for Soders, which is a sword, and 19 for Yamazaki – "other environmental".

I decide to focus on Yamazaki first, as she is considerably easier to

access. Even so, the clinic is monitored by an AI security system with computer-controlled checkpoints, so I need to find a uniform that'll give me better clearance. After spending some time getting my bearings, I find a security guard watching over the toilets beneath the restaurant area. And after giving him a coin to chase, he quickly provides me with a disguise.

Able to move more freely, I start looking for a way to eliminate Yamazaki. After considering several options, I wander into the kitchens and stumble upon an un-filleted fugu fish. My decision is made there and then. I gut the fish to get the poison, then knock out the two chefs so I can easily steal their disguise.

I head upstairs to the sushi bar and prepare extra-special, extra-deadly nigiri. It isn't long before Yamazaki ventures into the bar to sample the dish. She collapses a few moments later, dead as the fugu that killed her.

It's as well Yamazaki proves an easy kill, because it quickly becomes apparent that killing Soders with a sword is going to be a nightmare. First I need to acquire a sword, which tend not to be that common in a clinic. It turns out there's a ceremonial katana inside Yamazaki's suite. But to get to it I need a black security uniform with level 2 clearance, and none of the nearby guards are viable targets. In the end, I have to go all the way around the clinic, sneaking into the high security area just to get the uniform I need to get the sword.

With this done, I now need access to Soders himself. But he's in the operating theatre undergoing some pre-surgery stem-cell treatment. Only surgeons have access to the theatre, so I need to scrub up. In the end, I home in on the chief surgeon, who keeps venturing

Colorado is undoubtedly the least visually appealing of *Hitman*'s levels.





outside to chat to a helicopter pilot. While he's out there, I deal with two nearby security guards using the old, 'coin-toss and hammer to the face' trick, before nullifying the chief surgeon in the same way.

I drag the surgeon into the basement and don his scrubs. I can now access the surgery hall and kill Erich Soders.

Unfortunately my problems are far from over. First of all, it turns out surgeons carrying katanas don't go unnoticed in a high security hospital. Secondly, the operating theatre is overlooked by a control room and two viewing galleries, one of which is filled with doctors watching the operation.

Oh, and there's also another surgeon inside the theatre itself. It would be easier to walk into an actual theatre and kill the lead actor on stage, because at least the audience might think it was part of the act.

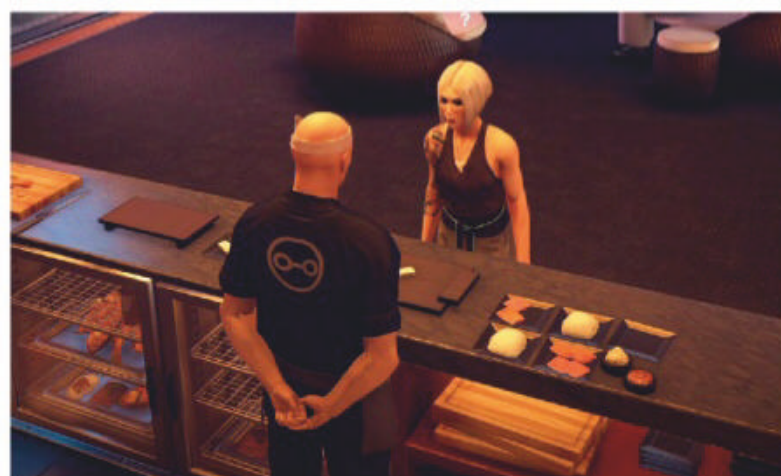
There's no way for me to do this subtly, so I'll have to settle for doing it quickly. I walk through the (mercifully empty) corridor into the surgery prep room, then pass through the door into the hall itself. Immediately the suspicion of everyone nearby starts rising. I walk up to the table, katana in hand and... It turns out the game won't let you kill Erich Soders with a melee weapon.

Because of Soders' unusual situation, alongside the fact that he's so closely monitored, *Hitman* assumes that you won't be stupid enough to attempt to kill Erich Soders with a large sword. I don't get a cue to kill him by hand or even throw the

weapon at him. All I get is Agent 47 staring blankly at the operating as the whole hospital explodes into chaos.

The alarm goes off, guards boil into the theatre from all sides. They demand that the mysterious assailant surrenders. I look around... and raise my sword. ■

SURGEONS CARRYING KATANAS DON'T GO UNNOTICED IN A HIGH SECURITY HOSPITAL





WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL



GRINDING

Zen and the art of mindless, repetitive tasks. *By Bo Moore*



RIGHT: The first few floors in *Slay the Spire* can feel like a grind, until you get some decent cards.



During the summer of 2009, my girlfriend at the time was working at a camp in another state. We'd talk on the phone during the evenings, and during those conversations I'd usually play a game. I was making my way through the first *InFamous* at the time, climbing towers or breaking into power substations – whatever it was that you did to reveal sections of the map. I didn't want to progress the story any – to do so would require actually paying attention to the game, and not the conversation with my girlfriend. No, I spent most of that time mindlessly running (or was it flying? Power-line sliding? Wow, I really don't remember that game very well) from point to point, beating up a few baddies and unlocking a new swath of the map. It was perfect passive progression.

Grinding in games can mean a lot of different things. It's most often used in reference to RPG levelling systems – killing thousands of boars to hit level 60 in *World of Warcraft*, if you will – but really can refer to any sort of easily-repeatable task that nets some amount of progression. Sometimes it's doing the same battles over and over, sometimes it's mining ore or chopping trees, sometimes it's just clicking until a number goes up.

During my *WoW* days, my raiding guild needed to outfit our entire roster with shadow-resist gear in order to progress on a boss in Black Temple, so I spent countless hours killing Shadow Elementals in Netherstorm, harvesting the materials we needed to craft our gear. More recently, I got to floor 500 or so in an endless *Slay the Spire* run with a nigh-unbeatable first-turn kill deck. At that point I wasn't really playing anymore, just pressing a few buttons in a specific sequence, but the enemies would die and I'd move to the next floor. Wash, rinse, repeat.

In RPGs, I like to over-level all at once, then crush through the story without worrying about hitting a

CASTING CALL *Podcasts to listen to while grinding*



THE PC GAMER SHOW
Forgive the self-plug, but why not catch up on PC gaming while you PC game?



COMEDY BANG BANG
Top notch improv comedy from some of the funniest people in the business.



PSEUDOPOD
Inject a few scares into your zen time with some quality horror stories.

level gate later on. I prefer that approach over the start-stop of having to keep my level high enough to keep progressing. I'd much rather find a nice easily-repeatable high-experience area where I can zone out for a few hours, then get back to the story without interruption.

Most recently, I've been playing *Final Fantasy XIV*. After beating the main story (and the fantastic recent expansion, *Shadowbringers*), I wanted to keep making progress on my character. So I turned to the game's gathering and crafting jobs. After work, it's nice to spend an hour or

player. I love working towards an objective, whether it's levelling a character, unlocking zones of the map, or just mining a bunch of ore.

With grinding, it's a way to work on that progression without having to dedicate much headspace. I can throw on a TV show, or chat on the phone – still making progress in the game, but without having the need to really pay attention.

Interestingly I don't really play games wholly built around grinding-type actions in this same way. I love *Stardew Valley* to death, with more than 300 hours across several playthroughs on multiple platforms. But despite its gameplay being almost entirely these sort of passive activities – planting and watering crops, fishing, digging through the mines – it's not the sort of game that I zone out while playing. I approach it more with a min/max style, wanting to optimise my farm for maximum production. There's no room for distraction when you have to consider optimal crop placements, watering patterns, grow times, and make sure your grange display wins top prize at the town fair.

To me the grind is for a departure from the main game, not the game itself. The one part of *Stardew Valley* that I do grind is the mine – the combat zone where I can dig deeper and deeper underground to find rarer and more expensive ore. I've been guilty of letting my farm fall into disrepair in order to forge deeper into those caves. I had to see the floor number keep going up. ■

THERE'S SOMETHING RELAXING ABOUT THIS MINDLESS FORM OF PLAYING

two mindlessly running from node to node mining ore, zoning out to decompress from the day. Then later in the evening, I'll tap a few keys every 30 seconds or so to smelt that ore into ingots while watching TV with my partner – and levelling up my crafting professions, of course.

There's something relaxing about this mindless form of playing. Like how Parks and Rec's Ron Swanson describes going fishing: "It's like yoga except I still get to kill something." Or in this case, I'm still making progress in the game.

That's really what it comes down to – progression. I've come to realise I'm a very goal-oriented type of



RIGHT: Crafting in *Final Fantasy XIV* can be a therapeutic activity after a stressful day.



JAMES
DAVENPORT

I've never seen a Star Trek, but I've seen every episode of Christian reality show *It Takes a Church*. I haven't read any Ernest Hemingway, but read and enjoyed the *Far Cry 5* prequel novel. I've never played a *Thief* game, but I've logged 300 hours of idle clicker *AdVenture Capitalist*.

COLD HOTTIES



MAN OF MEDAN

www.supermassivegames.com

→ I'm the guy that yells at idiot teens in horror movies. It's my solemn duty to make sure that everyone knows I wouldn't go into that dark room alone, or that I wouldn't follow the spooky noise, or that I'd be right back. Not so in *Man of Medan*, an interactive slasher movie where the blame only rests with me.

A LACK OF



CONTROL

www.remedygames.com

→ This is a telekinetic bathroom destruction simulator and I won't hear otherwise. Sure, it's wrapped around an interdimensional structure turned bureaucratic office building. Sure, it's a strange story about everyday objects with powers. But taking apart bathroom stalls with a weird pistol is the main attraction.

LUCHAMORE

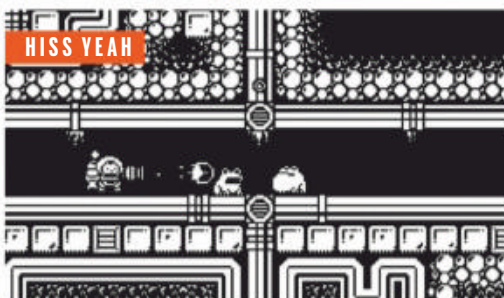


GUACAMELEE 2

www.guacamelee2.com

→ I'm moving, so the laptop is out and I'm catching up on *Metroidvanias* I've missed. *Guacamelee 2*'s writing is too obsessed with memes to play for the story, but it's worth enduring for the mind-bending platforming. Gotta juggle dimension-swapping, wall-jumping, and chicken transformations to succeed.

HISS YEAH



GATO ROBOTO

www.gatoroboto.com

→ A micro-*Metroid* starring a mech-piloting cat. I would say more but that's all there is to say. Took me three hours to finish, not too long, not too short. It's the classic loop of exploration, empowerment, and platforming condensed into a cute feline-themed package. Takes it easy on the memes, too.

MUST
★
PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by James
Davenport

PUT TOGETHER



GLASS MASQUERADE

bit.ly/2Mi14Rn

→ Life is a puzzle, except there are a ton of missing pieces and when you try to put it all together the final picture sucks. Not so in *Glass Masquerade*, where it's impossible to lose pieces and every complete image is a gorgeous glass-stained clock face. Ignore life, breathe, do some pretty puzzles.

WHO'S THE MONSTER?

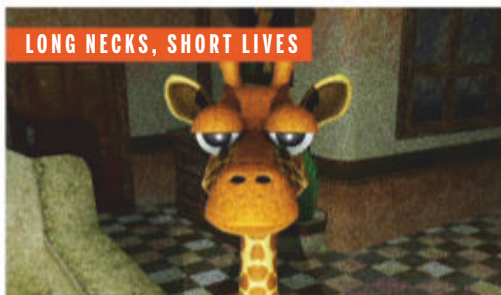


MONSTER HUNTER WORLD

www.monsterhunterworld.com

→ I'm too scared to google the recommended hunter rank for getting started in the *Iceborne*, so I won't. I'll just bash in the hard head of the same Diablos with a hammer. Poor bastard, stuck in a Groundhog Day scenario where a man in his underwear goes to his home for a surprise murder, ad infinitum.

LONG NECKS, SHORT LIVES



GIRAFFE TOWN

bit.ly/2IZpjae

→ *Giraffe Town* is a game about a giraffe. This particular giraffe is in love, but stricken with a case of extreme clumsiness. The less I say the better. Think of it like David Lynch's *Octodad*, a finicky physics character action game that transcends itself. You'll have to trust me on this one. Thanks!

SUBJECTIVE OBJECTS



VIGNETTES

vignettesga.me

→ Ever looked at the broad side of a toaster and thought, "That's a table." No? Well now there's a game for my pointless hypothetical. Spin objects to transform them into different objects at specific angles. Make the journey from toaster to table to telephone and beyond. A lovely perspective toy with trippy tunes.



Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA
Tel: 01225 442244 | **Email:** letters@pcgamer.com
www.pcgamer.com

Brand Director Tim Clark

Global Editor-in-Chief Evan Lahti

PC GAMER UK

Editor-in-Chief, UK Phil Savage
Managing Editor Robin Valentine
Online Editor, UK Tom Senior
Section Editor Andy Kelly
News Editor Fraser Brown
Guides Editor Harry Shepherd
Art Editor John Strike
Production Editor Tim Empey

PC GAMER US

Executive Editor Tyler Wilde
Senior Editor Wes Fenlon
Senior Reporter Steven Messner
Staff Writer James Davenport
Staff Writer Chris Livingston
Weekend Editor Jody Macgregor
News Lead Andy Chalk
Hardware Lead Bo Moore
Senior Hardware Editor Jarred Walton
Hardware Staff Writer Joanna Nelius

CONTRIBUTORS

Callum Agnew, Matthew Elliott, Ian Evenden, Natalie Flores, Malindy Hetfeld, Phil Iwaniuk, Luke Kemp, Rick Lane, Lauren Morton, Alice Newcome-Beill, Chris Schilling, Alex Spencer, Tom Sykes, Alex Wiltshire, Luke Winkie, Robert Zak

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION

Photographer Olly Curtis
Spy Illustrations David Lyttleton

DIGITAL PRODUCTION

Group Production Editor Steve Wright
Editorial Operations Assistant Nick Lee

PRODUCTION

Head of Production US & UK Mark Constance
Production Project Manager Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller Jason Hudson
Production Manager Fran Twentyman

ADVERTISING

Commercial Director Clare Dove
Advertising Director Tom Parkinson
Account Director Jeff Jones
Account Manager Kevin Stoddart

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING

Head of Print Licensing Rachel Shaw

SUBSCRIPTIONS & CIRCULATION

Head of subscriptions Sharon Todd
Head of Newstrade Tim Mathers

SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Chief Content Officer Aaron Asadi
Commercial Finance Director Dan Jotcham
Head of Art & Design Rodney Dive
Senior Art Editor, Games Warren Brown

SUBSCRIPTIONS Email: contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk | **UK orderline:** 0344 848 2852 | **International orderline:** +44 (0)344 848 2852 | www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

DISTRIBUTED BY Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU | **Tel:** 0203 787 9001 | www.marketforce.co.uk

LICENSING Email: licensing@futurenet.com

ISSN: 1351-3540

All contents © 2019 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

IT'S ALL OVER...

ECONOMY CLASS FLIGHT SIMULATOR

Welcome
to the next
generation
of hyper-real,
low-cost flight
simulation

Procedural
turbulence
– you never know
when it'll
strike

Realistic
0.00005%
chance of a
business class
upgrade

A full
selection of
terrible comedy
movies you'd
never watch
otherwise

Real-time
gameplay
– immerse yourself
in a full ten-hour
journey

Immersive 3D
soundscape
featuring snoring
passengers and
screaming children

Random
seat
allocation

Tiny
bag of
pretzels
included with
every copy

...UNTIL
**NOVEMBER
14**

Sales: 01270 898 104

E-mail: sales@palicomp.co.uk

Quick Delivery - 0% Finance Available* - Build Your Own Option



INTEL i5 COSMOS - £1099.99

INTEL i5 9600K - 6 Cores - 6 Threads (O.C 4.8Ghz)

ASUS PRIME Z370-P II

CORSAIR 8GB DDR4 3200Mhz

SAMSUNG 256GB PM981 M.2

SEAGATE 2TB Sata3 HDD

NVIDIA RTX2060 6GB

COOLERMASTER Masterbox Lite 5

MICROSOFT Windows 10 or 10 Pro



AMD ABYSS - £699.99

AMD Ryzen 5 2600X

ASUS TUF B450-PLUS

CORSAIR 8GB DDR4 2400Mhz

INTEL 512GB M.2 Nvme

SEAGATE 1TB SATA3 - 6Gb/s

AMD RX 570 8GB

KOLINK Stronghold

MICROSOFT Windows 10 or 10 Pro



INTEL i7 NEBULA - £1549.99

INTEL i7 9700K - 8 Cores - 8 Threads (O.C 4.8Ghz)

ASUS TUF Z370-PLUS GAMING

CORSAIR 16GB DDR4 3200Mhz

SAMSUNG 2 x 256GB PM981 M.2 in RAID 0

SEAGATE 2TB Sata3 HDD

NVIDIA RTX2070 8GB

KOLINK Observatory

MICROSOFT Windows 10 or 10 Pro



CREATE YOUR OWN CPU-MOTHERBOARD UPGRADE BUNDLE



ONE CARD

Endless possibilities...

Visit WHSmith, ASDA, Sainsbury's, Wilkos and Game for Steam Gift Cards in a variety of denominations. With Steam Gift Cards, you can add money to your Steam Wallet and enjoy all of your favourite PC, Mac, and SteamOS games.

- Instant Access to Thousands of PC Games.
- Create and Share Content. Gift your friends, trade items, and even create new content for games in the Steam Workshop. Help shape the future of your favourite games.
- Join the Community. Meet new people, join game groups, form clans, chat in-game and more! With over 100 million potential friends (or enemies), the fun never stops.

REQUIRES INTERNET CONNECTION AND FREE STEAM ACCOUNT TO ACTIVATE. Notice: Product offered subject to your acceptance of the Steam Subscriber Agreement ("SSA"). You must activate this product via the Internet by registering for a Steam account and accepting the SSA. Please see <http://www.steampowered.com/agreement> to view the SSA prior to purchase. If you do not agree with the provisions of the SSA, you should return this game unopened to your retailer in accordance with their return policy. ©2019 Valve Corporation. Steam and the Steam logo are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Valve Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries.

Powered by:  Incomm

Available at:



Sainsbury's

wilko

cardfactory

WHSmith

PC GAMER
PRESENTS

CYBERPUNK



THE BEST CYBERPUNK GAMES EVER!

OUR DEFINITIVE TOP 10



DEUS EX
SHADOWRUN
BLADE RUNNER
OBSERVER
SYSTEM SHOCK
INVISIBLE INC

THE
HISTORY
THE ART
THE INDIES

EXPLORING AN
ICONIC GENRE



PC GAMER
PRESENTS

CYBERPUNK

Future Publishing Ltd

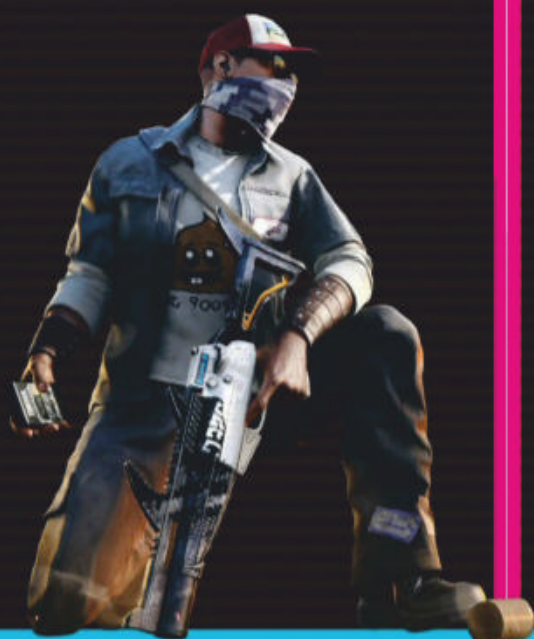
Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA11UA

Tel 01225 442244 | Email letters@pcgamer.com

www.pcgamer.com

facebook.com
/pcgamer magazineyoutube.com
/pcgamertwitter.com
/pcgamertwitch.tv
/pcgamer

club.pcgamer.com

pcgaming
show.com“WITHIN THESE PAGES WE’VE
LAID THE GENRE BARE”

ROBIN VALENTINE

Specialist in
ShadowrunningTwitter
@robinvalentineThis month
Determined that
corrective shoes do count
as a cybernetic implant.

I’m something of a cyberpunk myself, you know. The weak flesh of my eyes has been laser-corrected. My computer is a glowing octopus of wires. Even my hoodies are neon. Oh, also I like to smash the system.

It’s only right and proper, then, that I should be the one to oversee this tome of dystopian knowledge. Within these pages we’ve laid the genre bare – from its origins, to its most

shining stars, to the art that’s brought it to life. And, of course, we’ve chatted to the creators of perhaps its most extraordinary entry to date: the superlatively ambitious *Cyberpunk 2077*.

Hack the planet, street samurai.

ROBIN VALENTINE
MANAGING EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

TALK TO
PC GAMER

Have your say!
Email us at letters@
pcgamer.com

CONTENTS

04
CYBERPUNK
2077

CD Projekt RED’s
incredible dystopia.

10
CYBERPUNK
RED

Bring 2077’s world
to your tabletop.

14
THE HISTORY
OF CYBERPUNK

From Neuromancer
to *Deus Ex*.

20
THE BEST
OF CYBERPUNK

Ten games that
tower over the rest.

26
THE INDIES
OF CYBERPUNK

A voice from the
edge of the net.

30
THE ART
OF CYBERPUNK

Neon and rain,
metal and flesh.

CYBERPUNK

Cyberpunk 2077





HIGH TECH

LOW LIFE

Does 2077 hold true to the cyberpunk genre –
and is that even a good thing?

By Alex Spencer

Naming your game after the genre of fiction it's set in is a funny thing. Imagine if BioWare had spent the last decades peddling its two big RPG series, *Space Opera* and *High Fantasy*, before floundering a bit with the release of *Mecha-Science-Fantasy*. It's especially bold when the genre in question is cyberpunk – a subcategory of sci-fi that has always been kind of nebulous, its edges as fuzzy as if you'd just swallowed a palmful of Dex octagons.

There's a bulletpoint list of markers you can run through, sure. Cybernetic limbs. Mega-corporations. Hackers. Neon billboards and Japanese kanji. Ethernet cables that go straight into your skull. Neologisms that sounded cool and futuristic in 1984 but now seem a little silly and dated... and, yep, *Cyberpunk 2077* has them all.

Ultimately, though, these are empty signifiers. You could cobble together a generic golem out of these things and accurately call it cyberpunk – I'm looking at you, Netflix's *Altered Carbon* – but that doesn't get at what made these stories exciting in the first place: the sense of a terrifyingly plausible future. Not in that hard sci-fi way, of future tech so detailed you could probably request a spec sheet for it, but more the way technology warps the society that creates and uses it. And CD Projekt Red seems to agree.

"It is deeply fascinating to us to explore the relationship of humanity and technology and how it shapes life in 2077," says 2077 level designer Miles Tost. "What does this level of technology mean in a world where 'rich' and 'poor' have basically taken on entirely new meanings in terms of their dimensions?"

COMPANY TOWN

The open-world RPG is actually a remarkably good fit for cyberpunk. Like the noir detective stories it originally drew inspiration from, cyberpunk is fundamentally a genre of the city – places where the population clusters, and subcultures can grow quickest around new technologies. And so it feels natural that most of what we've seen of 2077 hasn't really been about player character V. For now, at least, they're something of a cipher, and Night City is the undisputed star of the game. Well, except for Keanu, maybe.

It's the promise of Night City that gets you, isn't it? The promise of an

open world as crowded with details and vignettes as it is with cybernetically-enhanced bodies. In the gameplay demos we've seen so far, stepping out onto the street means being nearly overwhelmed with chunks of world-building and background dialogue picked out in surtitles that hover over the speaker's head.

Side quests, an area in which CD Projekt has pretty thoroughly proved its chops in the past, also provide a great chance to squeeze in a few extra perspectives on how this future is shaping its people. And they're a great way of pulling you through the world, the same way a lot of cyberpunk fiction uses the thread of a detective story.

Even the first-person perspective you're roaming the city in feels like the right choice. Those soaring, spinner's-eye shots of Blade Runner's cityscape might be the one image pretty much everyone

points to when talking about the genre, but for my money, cyberpunk futures are best viewed from the pavement.

CASTLES IN THE SKY

Those stacks of skyscrapers are a way of literalising the rich/poor divide that's so vital to cyberpunk's vision of the world. The 1% (or, more accurately, the 0.001%) live clear of the grime, in upper orbit or mega-suburbs or gleaming penthouses. The megacorporations aren't just a stock genre element – they're a way of showing how access to technology is mediated by our capitalist overlords. What does an obsolescence cycle look like for an ability-boosting implant? What if your bionic eye came as a mandatory part of your job? And what would happen when you left?

If you wanted to sum up cyberpunk in a single handy soundbite, it'd be the one that Neuromancer author William Gibson has wheeled out in countless interviews: "The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed."

So if you're not one of the people craning their necks from down on the street, then you most likely deserve the guillotine, or whatever the cyberpunk equivalent is. Probably just a guillotine with a few cables and neon lights stuck on the side, to be honest. Whether all this

ANATOMY OF A CYBERPUNK

An expert, totally-reliable guide to dressing like V

1 RealSkinn: synthetic skin designed to cover cybernetic implants, like that patch of plaster covering where you keep ramming your desk chair into the wall.

2 This illuminated high collar apparently has some tech functionality – note the cables running over one shoulder – but what if it was really just there to block out noise from the streets?

3 A carabiner. Just a regular old carabiner. In case V suddenly feels the urge to hit their local indoor climbing wall, perhaps?

4 Four shoulder-mounted 'bumper protectors' – again, probably for keeping people out of V's face on a busy street.

5 Logo for Samurai, a fictional band fronted by Johnny Silverhand (Keanu Reeves himself, though it's Dennis Lyxzén of non-fictional Swedish punk band Refused lending his vocals to the songs).





“WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF
DEMOCRACY WAS A
CAPITALIST-CONTROLLED FARCE?”

RIGHT: One piece of technology that will never go out of fashion: the nylon shellsuit.

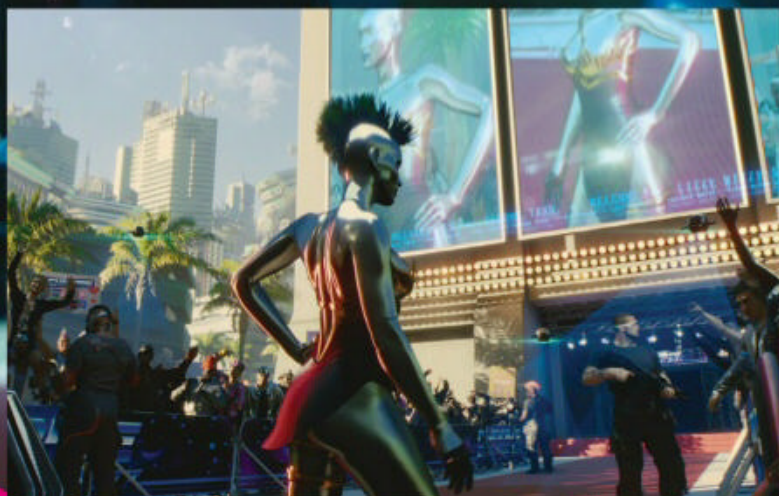


CYBERPUNK

Cyberpunk 2077

OUTDATED TECHNOLOGY COMES
PACKAGED WITH THE GENRE
– THERE'S NOTHING LESS
CYBERPUNK THAN WI-FI

RIGHT: This is Lizzy Wizzy. Shining proof that not all of 2077's worldbuilding is cool.



matching of genre features and game tropes is happy coincidence or careful design, it's hard to tell. But CD Projekt certainly seems to understand what has traditionally made cyberpunk interesting.

"To us, cyberpunk explores a dystopian world of low life and high tech in which we focus on street-level stories. Our protagonist is not the kind that is out to save the world," Tost says. It's an absolutely textbook definition of the genre, one that takes in the wisdom of cyberpunk scholars like Bruce Sterling, Lawrence Person and especially Mike Pondsmith, creator of the Cyberpunk pen-and-paper RPG, now consulting on 2077.

Everything that's been shown so far promises a faithful adaptation, a game worthy of the label it has stuck on itself. But I said at the outset that cyberpunk's main thrill is catching an ugly little glimpse of our own future, and that future surely looks very different now to the way it did two or three decades ago. So, given that CD Projekt clearly knows its cyber-onions, how is the developer intending to spin its own vision out of all those influences?

"It's funny because we're trying to re-envision how people from the '80s and '90s envisioned the future, and then lace that future with modern nuance," Tost says. It's an issue that's particularly noticeable with the outdated technology that comes packaged with the genre – there's nothing less cyberpunk than Wi-Fi, for example – but it goes deeper than that.

"I think there's a degree of truth in assuming that cyberpunk was born out of the fears of people in the '80s and these fears were consciously exaggerated enough to form a separate genre," he says. "The image of megacorporations you know from 2020 [the second edition of Pondsmith's Cyberpunk RPG] was born out of fears of privatising the state and asking: 'What would you do if democracy was a capitalist-controlled farce?'"

"And we're adding some contemporary scares to that as well. How has social media, for example, evolved in 2077? What power does it hold?"

The game's main way of addressing this topic seems to be through 'Braindances'. As Tost explains it, these are, "a way of experiencing someone else's past experiences, including their emotions, what they felt," in a virtual reality representation – a localised dose of cyberspace. It's an idea with its roots in the tabletop RPG's sourcebooks, which predate the likes of Twitter or Facebook, but it's easy to see how it could be extrapolated out into something with more timely social media parallels.

Braindances are presented as a form of escapism from the grim realities of life in Night City, with people using them to play tourist inside celebrities' heads and live out staged fantasies that appear to be real. It's Instagram for your frontal lobes, or Twitch by way of the holodeck.

Among the modern fears shaping 2077's world, Tost also namechecks the specter of climate change – a fairly inescapable part of our current future. In the game, global warming is apparently the reason for Night City's large Haitian population, presumably because the island nation is now underwater.

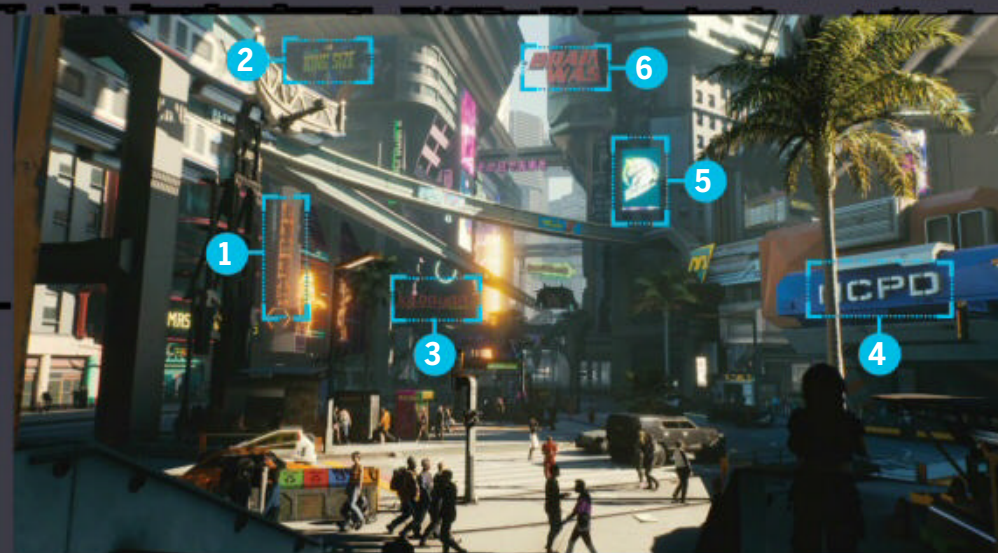
Whether CD Projekt actually has anything interesting to say on either of these topics remains to be seen – but hey, that's what playing the game is for.

AUGMENTED REALITY

There is one aspect of 2077's future that has already raised a few red flags, though: its treatment of body augmentation. Whether in the form of prosthetic limbs or brain mods, this has always been a big theme of cyberpunk stories, and one that can be harmful if not dealt with properly. And all the way back to the original

SIGN OF THE TIMES

The world-building detail crammed into a single frame



1 2nd Amendment, a gun shop. You know, because of the "bear arms" bit in the US constitution. Worst expansion pack ever.

2 Not sure what exactly King Size is, but it looks like another bit of commentary on sexualised advertising. Or a dick joke.

3 Kabayan Foods represents the Filipino influence on Night City. Reckon they do adobo? Mmm, adobo.

4 The Night City Police Department. Sure you'll have no bother with these, given how famously laid-back the US police are.

5 The unicorn just has to be a reference to the one from Deckard's dreams and Gaff's papercraft in Blade Runner, right?

6 Brain Wash? After giving every single one of these signs the 'zoom, enhance' treatment, my brain could do with a quick spit and polish.

RPG, Cyberpunk's handling has always been a little clumsy.

In the original tabletop game, adding modifications to your character's body caused a literal 'humanity' stat to drop (though the most recent edition takes a more nuanced approach). That doesn't seem to be present in 2077, but Tost outlines one of the consequences which has carried over: "A mental illness, that in 2077 is still very poorly understood, called Cyberpsychosis can cause people to run amok when they implant themselves with too much cyberware and in the process lose their humanity."

There are no mechanical implications to cyberpsychosis – this can't happen to the player, Tost says, because it'd be an instant game over – but it's still integral to the game's fiction, and the presence of a 'mental illness' that's self-inflicted by too much technology sets alarm bells ringing. It's like CD Projekt talking about the idea of the natural body being 'sacred', and augmentations 'profane'. This stuff might sound OK, until you apply its logic back to the real-life present and realise the things it says about, for example, disabled and trans people are potentially offensive.

One of the benefits of reconstructing a genre three decades on from its initial peak should be the chance it offers to

consider, with modern sensitivity, what aspects weren't treated well the first time round and address them. Maybe this will play out in the full game – there might well be a side quest dedicated to exploring the topic more thoughtfully and sensitively – but the early signs are a little troubling.

'PUNK'S NOT DEAD

But there's no question that 2077 gets the genre, whatever your fuzzy definition. All the cool surface bits are there, presented more lavishly than we've ever seen before: the chrome-and-black style, the nostalgic-meets-futuristic tech, the grime illuminated by bursts of neon. CD Projekt knows the right references to drop, and the studio has demonstrated that its understanding runs a little deeper than that.

For better or worse, the game will likely overwrite the public understanding of what 'cyberpunk' means. This is a genre whose boundaries are defined by precious few texts – the undisputed cyberpunk canon consists of roughly one book – and no straight-up cyberpunk work has reached the audience CD Projekt is going to.

So yes, *Cyberpunk 2077* is cyberpunk. Duh, it's right there in the title. The important question now is exactly how the developer chooses to define and explore that. ■

DUNGEONS & DYSTOPIA

CYBERPUNK RED is a tabletop RPG sharing its world with Cyberpunk 2077. Is it worth plugging your datajack into?

By Jody MacGregor

In Night City, even the sky glows neon. Radioactive fallout from the Fourth Corporate War has turned dusk and dawn red, some districts are nothing but rubble and abandoned combat tanks, while others have been reclaimed and thrive again.

This is the setting for Cyberpunk Red, a tabletop RPG in the same world as *Cyberpunk 2077*, but a few decades earlier in the year 2045. It's a pen-and-paper RPG played with dice and character sheets, like *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Call of Cthulhu*, a format for games that's seen a popular resurgence in recent years.

The best explanation of tabletop RPGs is still that given by Abed in *Community*: "This is a roleplaying

game. It takes place entirely in our collective imagination. I tell a story and you make choices in the story."

HARDWIRED

Both *Cyberpunk 2077* and *Cyberpunk Red* owe their existence to a tabletop RPG designed by Mike Pondsmith and published by R. Talsorian Games in 1988. Its rules have been through several iterations, the most popular version being *Cyberpunk 2020*, which described a corporate-run Night City in the Free State of Northern California in what was then a hard-to-imagine near future. As the actual year 2020 approaches, *Cyberpunk Red* moves the setting forward, streamlining rules and assumptions along the way.

Pondsmith describes the relationship between R. Talsorian's tabletop RPGs and CD Projekt Red's >>



» videogame by comparing them to Star Wars, saying that if his original game was the first movie, “right now Talsorian is running The Empire Strikes Back, while 2077 is essentially Return of the Jedi or beyond even.”

The first taste of Cyberpunk Red is a ‘Jumpstart Kit’, a set of rules aimed at beginners. There’s a worldbook that outlines the setting, complete with an introductory scenario and a set of six ready-made characters with roles like Rockerboy, Tech, and Nomad to choose from. A full-length rulebook is currently being written, with R. Talsorian running on Valve Time: ‘It’ll be done when it’s done.’ Right now, the jumpstart kit is enough to get your first game of Cyberpunk Red going.

RED SCARE

Night City as portrayed here is the same place we’ve seen in footage of *Cyberpunk 2077*, with districts such as beachfront Pacifica and details like

THROUGH THE AGES *A guide to the many editions of Cyberpunk*



CYBERPUNK 1988

Set in 2013, the future caught up to it a little too quickly. Introduced the Friday Night Firefight rules.



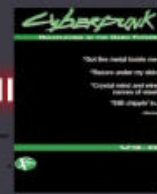
CYBERPUNK 2020 1990

The definitive edition, supported by a plethora of supplements still available today.



CYBER-GENERATION 1993

A spin-off about kids with superpowers, like X-Men in mirrorshades.



CYBERPUNK V3.0 2005

In the 2030s, history’s forgotten. Widely hated, especially the art, and now non-canon.



CYBERPUNK RED 2019

A new timeline updated to 2045. Produced in collaboration with CD Projekt Red.

as wells as in meatspace. Jacking directly into cyberspace can cook your brain, so people rely on lower-tech solutions, airgapped local networks and a CitiNet that’s geographically restricted and only slightly more advanced than the modern web. The world’s most

exist and corporations make employees sign lifetime contracts. Segotari sells interactive braindance games with names like *Elflines Online*, there’s a world currency, and posergangs biosculpt themselves to look like characters from The Brady Bunch and The Wizard of Oz.

It’s got a sense of humour even as it bills this as a ‘dark future’, but that was true of Cyberpunk 2020 as well, with its clown gangs and red-and-black glowing holozones denoting which areas of the street were no-parking zones in the event of a Free Fire Emergency because vehicles there could legally be used as barricades by police or corporate units.

It may contain some daft jokes and satire, but it’s still a dystopia. One section of Night City has been abandoned by the police and become a combat zone, where gangs like the cybered-up Iron Sights and neo-fascist Red Chrome Legion rule. It’s not a nice place to live, but an exciting place for games.

BELOW: Not everyone’s poor in the dark future.

SHE’S INCREDIBLE MATH

Cyberpunk 2020 had an elegant central mechanic, but incongruously complicated rules for combat. It was a game that preached style over substance and yet had rules for fighting designed so that over time they would statistically resemble the results of the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports.

Those rules were called Friday Night Firefight. Cyberpunk Red calls its combat rules Thursday Night Throwdown, and explains that there will be a fuller version to come in the core rulebook. These rules combine fiddliness and abstraction, so I’m not sure they’ll please people who want cinematic, narrative fights or those who want to know the diameter of exit wounds in millimetres.

A nice addition is the rule for what happens before a fight, called the Facedown. Characters add their Reputation and Cool scores to the roll of a d10, and whoever wins intimidates the other. The loser can back down or fight on, but will take a -3 on every roll.

As for netrunning, it was always a pain in Cyberpunk 2020 because, though it took seconds from the hacker’s perspective, it took ages at

IT MAY CONTAIN SOME DAFT JOKES AND SATIRE, BUT IT’S STILL A DYSTOPIA

the elite paramedics of Trauma Team very much in evidence. Yet this version of the city is being rebuilt after a war – its skyline full of cranes and its radioactive corporate zone only visited by desperate scavs.

Nomad packs, road warriors from the hellscape between cities, have been recruited to help with the reclamation – presumably if you can drive an armoured battletruck you can handle bulldozers.

The internet’s broken too, thanks to future wars being fought online

advanced AIs have all taken the opportunity to flee to a secure ‘Ghost World’ on a system in the abandoned ruins of Hong Kong run by a ghost in the machine named Alt Cunningham, which sounds like something the videogame could well follow up on.

Though there are hints of what’s to come, the focus is on describing the world in ‘the Time of the Red’ so you can run your own games there. It’s a setting where designer drugs are legal and people wear armoured jackets down the street, unions don’t



Image credit: Eddie Mendoza

the table, and could be done from the couch before a mission even started. Now, netrunning is something you have to do up close, wirelessly but within six meters of an access point, and it plays out in real time. While the netrunner is running Banhammer to defeat Black ICE, the rest of the party can be holding off the guards.

That's fun, but almost all of the netrunner's abilities and programs boil down to their Interface stat versus a difficulty value. If they beat it they move on to another challenge, if they fail then things stall. Still, it's an improvement over the old rules.

My players had fun with character creation. The Jumpstart Kit provides six pre-generated characters with names and faces though the rules suggest changing those and I heartily recommend it, just for a sense of



Image credit: Helio Frazão

ABOVE: Apparently smoking's going to come back in a big way in the future.

LEFT: Invest in neon today for a big payout tomorrow.

ownership. Then you make a lifepath for them. A selling point of the Cyberpunk games, lifepaths present you with tables that delineate your life before the game starts.

It's likely you'll have more enemies than friends, and two of my players came out with zero pals, which immediately says something about them as people. Deceased family members are common, along with kidnappings and betrayals. The book explains that the versions of

lifepaths presented here are truncated, and the rulebook will give them more substance, but even these miniature lifepaths gave my players rich backstories full of ideas for future plotlines I could run.

SCREAMSHEETS

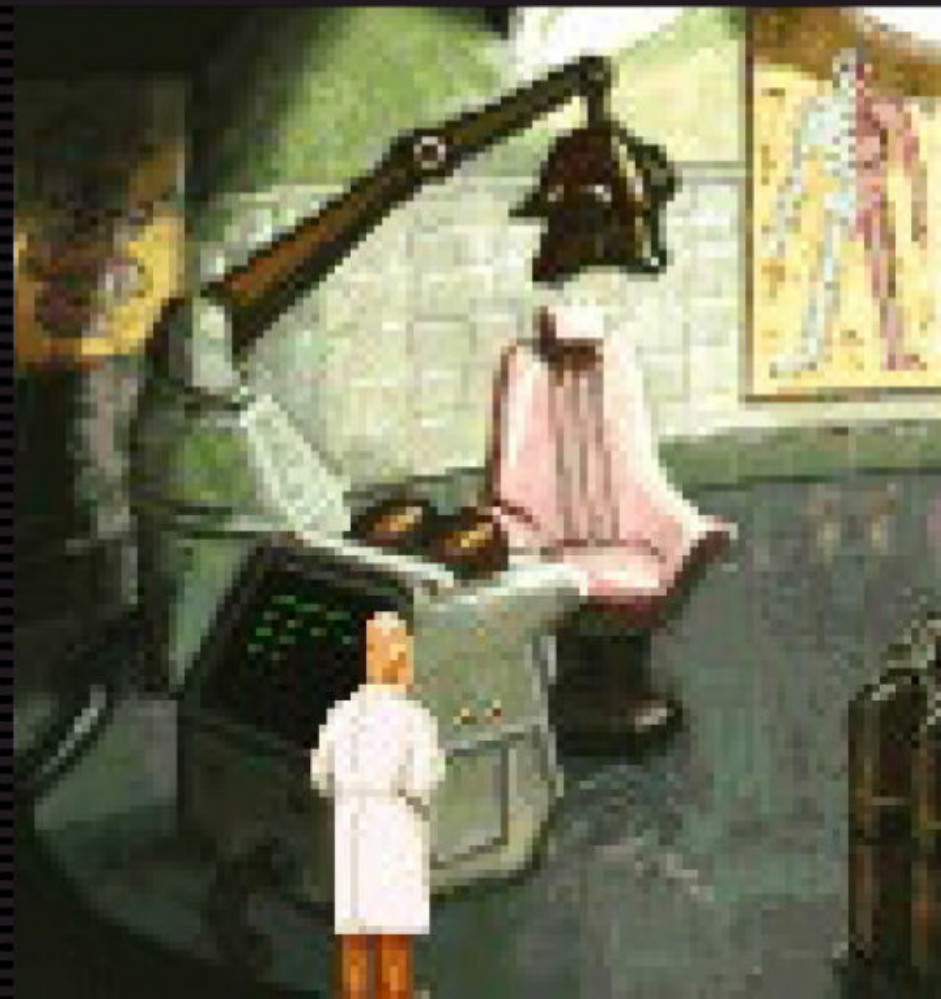
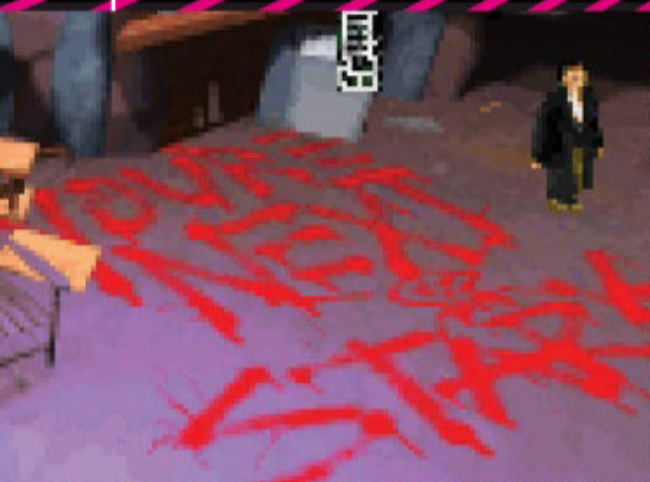
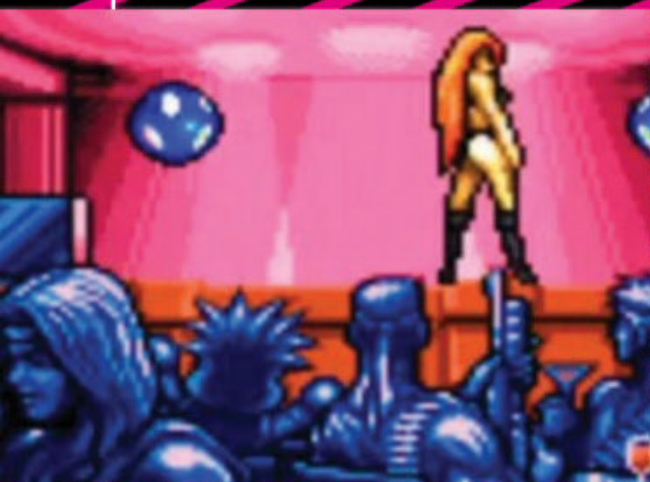
The last thing in the Jumpstart Kit is a set of beginner adventures, the first of which is fleshed-out while the rest are left as notes. This intro scenario is called The Apartment, and it casts all the PCs as living together in a building that's about to be violently taken over. The siege can play out in multiple ways, and I appreciate the freedom to mould it to your players with suggestions based on what abilities they have. One of the options is to have the neighbours betray them, but my players immediately bonded with the kooky NPCs, so I'm glad I threw that out.

One thing missing is an equipment guide with prices and names. Most of the gear on the character sheets is plain, a Very Heavy Pistol or a Groundcar, but cyberpunk's a genre where nameology matters, where you want to be able to whip out a Malorian Arms Flechette Pistol and have it mean something.

Still, all my complaints are minor quibbles. It's effective at creating a mood, and my players immediately understood the vibe – one's playing a wannabe pro gamer named Zigz, while another's got a tragic past and calls himself Jack Saturday. The gold standard for beginner RPG products is still the D&D Starter Kit, and the best introduction to roleplaying will always be enthusiastic friends who are already into it, but failing that Cyberpunk Red's Jumpstart Kit and a viewing of Blade Runner or Bubblegum Crisis does the job admirably. ■

Image credit: Anselm Ziehlanka





A HISTORY OF DARK FUTURES

For over 30 years, cyberpunk has mapped technology's most pessimistic path.

By Richard Cobbett



CYBERPUNK

The History of Cyberpunk

Although earlier examples do exist, nothing sums up the mood and aesthetic of cyberpunk quite like the opening of William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." It's a genre of science fiction often marked by its contrasts; low life and high tech, to quote author Bruce Sterling, and a vision of the near future with its feet heavily planted in both the obsessions and pessimism of the 1980s.

It's instantly recognisable, and yet defies neat categorisation, with elements of noir, satire, fetishism and paranoia all typically mixed together. In its stock form, it's the near future as seen from the gutter – individualists struggling to live as they choose in the perpetual darkness and driving rain of oppressive future cities where megacorporations rule everything and everyone. It's the antithesis of utopian sci-fi such as the *Star Trek* series, typically rooted in a sense of nihilism and criminality. Corruption is rife, violence is omnipresent, and law belongs to the highest bidder.

However, like most genres, there's far more to the setting than that. For starters, it's a dark view of the future

RIGHT: *Neuromancer*, a tongue-in-cheek vision of the future that still seems oddly plausible.

BELOW RIGHT: Westwood's *Circuit's Edge* wasn't afraid to get adult, even when games were seen as kids toys.

BOTTOM: In *Bloodnet*, always practice safe sex. Specifically, 'not with evil vampires'.



that's also shaped by its creators' passions; a strong Asian vibe to the worlds, for instance, from the iconic geisha billboard that introduces us to *Blade Runner*'s near-future Los Angeles, to the existence of archetypes like *Shadowrun*'s 'street samurai'. The result tends to be worlds that are very cool to visit, but would be hellish to actually live in.

Deeper down though, cyberpunk is a genre that's less interested in the fancy toys and bright lights as the questions that they raise about humanity – identity, sexuality, ethics, memory, freedom, and more. *Blade Runner*, for example, is nominally a movie about a cop chasing down robots, but in practice is a deeper philosophical work that explores the nature of humanity by contrasting cold protagonist Deckard with the emotional Replicants he hunts.

This type of exploration is part of most major cyberpunk works of the last few decades, regardless of their origins. Be it the title of *Ghost In The Shell* referring to a spark of soul even when all organic elements have been replaced with machinery, to *The Matrix*, widely discussed for both its



overt themes, such as the nature of reality, and for the many metaphors that can have read into it, most notably its potential to be seen as a transgender coming out story, and – rather less positively – the rise of philosophies such as ‘redpilling’ within certain online communities.

CLOSER TO HOME

But let's turn our attention to games. Cyberpunk has been a part of them

adventure/RPG cyberpunk action over a decade before *Deus Ex*; one where you could go from selling your organs for pocket money, to wandering down the street and finding a religion based on *Pong*.

As a game though, it made few waves, and this is honestly true for most attempts until the new millennium. Where they're remembered, it's primarily for their oddities. The original *Blade Runner*

IT'S INSTANTLY RECOGNISABLE, AND YET DEFIES NEAT CATEGORISATION

since the beginning, even if never as popular a setting as you might expect. *Neuromancer* saw a game conversion as far back as 1988, and many of its elements are still present in cyberspace futures today – hacking as a whole virtual world where the hacker must literally fight against ICE (Intrusion Countermeasure Electronics), upgrades in the form of skill chips, and so on. While not a great game, it was certainly a forward-thinking one, offering

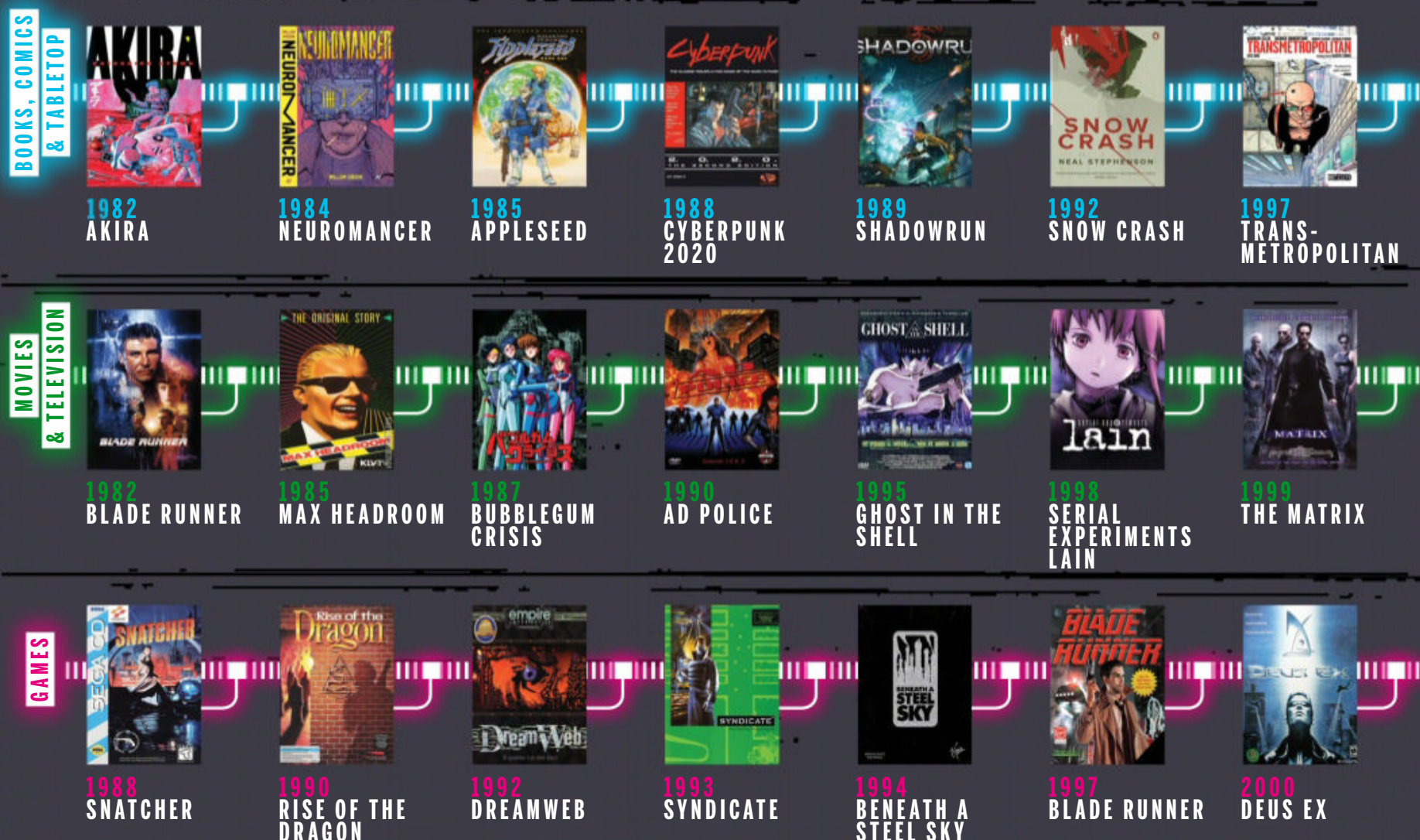
game particularly stands out here: an 8-bit outing not technically based on the movie – that would have been expensive – but rather ‘inspired by the Vangelis soundtrack’. Needless to say, that inspiration somehow led to you being a cop in a big coat chasing down ‘replidroids’ in a futuristic city. That was 1985. Westwood's official game wouldn't arrive until 1997.

Not being huge commercial successes didn't mean that these



GREAT MOMENTS IN CYBERPUNK

The works that predicted the world we probably don't want to live in...





games weren't interesting. One of the more ambitious ones was Westwood's *Circuit's Edge* – that's Westwood as in the future creator of *Command & Conquer*. This was a text adventure with very simple graphical elements, based on the novel *When Gravity Falls*, with Islamic elements instead of the

were in drew more overall from *Blade Runner*'s aesthetics than cyberpunk philosophy. *Metal Gear* creator Hideo Kojima, for example, created *Snatcher*, a totally original story about a detective with a mysterious past hunting humanoid robots in the futuristic Neo Kobe City. Even more blatant

ABOVE: It took 24 years to get a proper *Shadowrun* game on PC, and over 30 for *Cyberpunk*.

FUTURE SHOCKS

When games broke free of that, the results could be fascinating. *DreamWeb* was one of the earliest to make waves, though not so much for the fact that your character was a potentially insane serial killer being guided by his dreams, as for the inclusion of a sex scene showing a few scandalous pixels of penis. It was an interesting game though, at least for the first few missions, before everyone involved unfortunately seemed to get somewhat bored with the concept.

Other prominent games of the '90s included Origin's *Cybermage: Darklight Awakening*, arguably the most '90s name ever, the original *System Shock*, interactive movies with names like *Angel Devoid* and *BurnCycle*, and of course, the opening disc of *Final Fantasy VII*, which eschewed traditional fantasy for dark alleyways and the evil Shinra corporation. While it wasn't on PC, CD32 game *Liberation: Captive II* also deserves a mention. It was an RPG about freeing prisoners in a huge, fully explorable city. Almost impossible in scope then, it's still impressive to consider today.

Three of the more interesting failed experiments came from creators John Antinori and Laura Kampo: *Bloodnet*, *Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller*, and (minus Kampo) *Ripper*. They're not great games, but they represent some of the most earnest attempts to Make Cyberpunk Work. *Bloodnet* mixed the traditional elements with vampires, in an open-world adventure/RPG in which

CYBERPUNK INSPIRATION HAS ALWAYS BEEN A PART OF PC GAMING

usual Asian ones. While almost entirely forgotten today, it's an interesting piece of gaming history both for its technical side, with elements such as NPC scheduling, and for featuring some of the earliest gay/trans characters on PC.

Ideas in general were the genre's strength, even if the games they

was Sierra's *Rise Of The Dragon*, a Chinese-themed adventure set in Los Angeles that named its hero 'Blade Hunter'. Nothing, however, was ever quite as shameless as Access Software's *Mean Streets*, which didn't just lift *Blade Runner*'s style, but shamelessly pinched one of its advertising posters.

WELCOME TO THE INTERNET

Three reasons to be glad you have Chrome instead of a cyberpunk rig



1 IT WILL KILL YOU
Oh yes. Forget flame-wars. The cyberpunk internet is home to literal daemons and deadly Black ICE. If you're lucky, it'll only fry your brain.



2 IT'S TRAUMATIC
It's a whole world seemingly designed by the people who draw heavy metal album covers. Skulls, torture devices... get used to it.



3 IT'S AWKWARD
It's bad enough getting lost in abysses full of metaphors and puzzles, without having to beg for directions while stark naked.



Protagonist'. Its central concept, a virtual world called the Metaverse, became an inspiration for what the internet could be – popularising, for instance, the word 'avatar' as a name for a character, and the dream of a user-created space in which code and imagination could craft any landscape. This, alas, never happened, with the best attempt, *Second Life*, quickly descending from utopian dreams of virtual universities and truly world-wide rock concerts into a virtual universe of porn shops.

Still, the dream defined both an idealised future for the internet and gaming in general, that we've seen explored in everything from MMORPGs to VR. Microsoft's Xbox Live was heavily inspired by the novel, for example, with its creators given copies to read as homework.

There's definitely something endearing about that: while cyberpunk as a genre may have often been marginalised in gaming next to newer, shinier visions of the future, it was helping define the future long before the likes of *Deus Ex* brought its nihilistic visions mainstream.

Now, in an era of indie creators facing off against huge publishers and platform holders, it has new meaning – the establishment that wants more than just your money, rebels creating art, and the internet as the last battlefield where David can fight Goliath. It may not be dark alleyways and rainy cities, but gaming doesn't really get much more cyberpunk than that. Unless, of course, David finally upgrades to a katana. ■

you regularly had to feed to maintain your sanity, and any NPC was a potential target. *Hell* was about a future government working with demons to damn their enemies (though it was really a virtual reality scam). Finally, *Ripper* brought Jack the Ripper into the future, with some hilariously campy FMV, and a huge cast of actors such as Christopher Walken and a pre-fame Paul Giamatti.

Alas, it wouldn't really be until Westwood returned to the genre with its official *Blade Runner* game, and Ion Storm released *Deus Ex*, that the genre would truly get its dues on PC.

Even then, it's been a bumpy ride. Until CD Projekt, we'd never seen an official Cyberpunk game, despite the P&P having been written back in the very Web 1.0 era of 1988. And while there had been pretty good console RPGs based on its main competitor, *Shadowrun* (cyberpunk, but with elves and trolls and magic), it wouldn't be until over a decade later that Microsoft finally released a PC one. Unfortunately, this one wasn't an RPG, but a mediocre team-based FPS that fans mostly loathed. It wouldn't be for several more years that *Shadowrun Returns* would save the series' reputation with a trilogy of excellent games. The second one, *Dragonfall*, is especially good.

METaverse AND BEYOND

Despite the struggles, cyberpunk has always been a part of PC gaming – elements borrowed, inspiration drawn, cool things cherry-picked, whether something simple, like the

ABOVE: *Dreamweb*, the only known game where Neil Gaiman murders the future.

anime stylings of Bungie's *Oni*, the cool approach of hacking in Introversion's *Uplink*, or the sprawling dystopia of *Syndicate* and *Syndicate Wars*, in which you're the evil corporation instead of the oppressed antihero.

Along with *Blade Runner*, one particular work has repeatedly cropped up in gaming culture – Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. While part of the genre, it largely satirised cyberpunk tropes, as best summed up by the main character being a hacker pizza delivery boy called 'Hiro





THE TOP 10

CYBERPUNK

GAMES

Enter the future with these classic trips to the dark side of science-fiction.

By Richard Cobbett

There's an innate joy to a good cyberpunk game; that sense of fighting The Man, of struggling up from the gutter in a world that doesn't care, of being a rebel with a cause and, more importantly, some serious hardware. Sometimes it's a depressing odyssey, other times, very tongue in cheek.

Here, then, are our pick of the games worth selling your genitals on the black market for.



ANACHRONOX

RELEASED: 2001 | PUBLISHER: EIDOS INTERACTIVE | DEVELOPER: ION STORM

10

Few cyberpunk games have the same indie-rock feel as *Anachronox*, the game from Ion Storm that wasn't *Deus Ex* or *Daikatana*. It's Tom Hall's tribute to pretty much everything Tom Hall loves, from the dimension-shifting titular planet to comic book worlds, to the fact that you spend much of the game travelling with a planet as a companion. A literal planet. Shrunk down, hovering next you, its people voting on what they all want to do next. *Anachronox* is a janky experience to be sure, but an unforgettable one, and it's a genuine tragedy we'll never get the planned sequel.



BENEATH A STEEL SKY

RELEASED: 1994 | PUBLISHER: VIRGIN | DEVELOPER: REVOLUTION SOFTWARE

9

Beneath A Steel Sky offers a different feel to most cyberpunk; a somewhat low-key, sardonic take, in a city that thrives on cruel mundanity. It's not long before you're digging deeper into cyberpunk tropes, however, as you battle the omnipresent computer system LINC, explore cyberspace in search of clues, and save a city that's *Blade Runner* by way of Hull. Along the way you get the delightful company of your robot buddy Joey, who mirrors the genre's love of transhumanism with his own slow evolution from humble circuit board to – well, spoilers. Best of all, it's completely free.



TECHNOBABYLON

RELEASED: 2015 | PUBLISHER: WADJET EYE GAMES | DEVELOPER: WADJET EYE GAMES

8

It may be a fantastic adventure, but *Technobabylon* stands out most for having a deep sense of heart. Cyberpunk is often a cold genre, either through pessimism or a focus on the dehumanising nature of technology. *Technobabylon* flips that, with a story that comes at the usual elements from an entirely human direction – family, loss, isolation and community. Its icier elements remain brutal, from restaurants that serve cloned human flesh to terrorists whose bones have been turned into bombs, but it's the warmth that makes it unforgettable. That and the jingle for T.H.E. Foods, which will, alas, never leave you.



VA-11 HALL-A

RELEASED: 2016 | PUBLISHER: SUKEBAN GAMES | DEVELOPER: YSBYRD GAMES

7

Most cyberpunk games have you fighting against a corrupt system in some way. *VA-11 HALL-A* is more about helping it get drunk. It's a mix of visual novel and bartending simulator, where you bounce between mixing drinks and talking with the bizarre visitors at your seedy bar.

The trick is that, by mixing the right drinks, you can make them open up and tell you stories of the harsh world outside. Some of those guests are dogs. It's that kind of bar. *VA-11 HALL-A*'s clever ideas and well realised setting are well worth visiting for a round or two.



EYE: DIVINE CYBERMANCY

RELEASED: 2011 | PUBLISHER: STREUM ON STUDIO | DEVELOPER: STREUM ON STUDIO

6

We're meant to give you a pithy summary of *EYE* at this point, but that's just not going to happen. You won't find many games so devoted to making your brain melt, from its convoluted plot to the way the game works. You're an amnesiac caught in a dreamscape, and things only get more surreal when you enter the real world and find yourself surrounded by groups with names like the Secreta Secretorum and the Meta-Streumic Force. *EYE* is every cyberpunk trope thrown into a big futuristic blender and then spiced up with a little LSD. It's endlessly fascinating, especially if you like *Deus Ex* but find it just a bit too predictable.



SYSTEM SHOCK 2

RELEASED: 1999 | PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS | DEVELOPER: IRRATIONAL GAMES

5

The *System Shock* series isn't quite the same flavour of cyberpunk as most of the games on this list, but it stands as one of the first truly successful attempts at the genre. Its villain, rogue AI SHODAN, is deservedly considered one of gaming's greatest baddies, and the first game's take on cyberspace as a surreal maze of wireframe graphics and deadly geometric shapes certainly warrants the series its place. The sequel largely drops that element, but replaces it with a new interest in transhumanism by way of the 'improvements' offered by a more evolved SHODAN, who refuses to be humbled by needing to rely on a mere fleshbag.



WATCH DOGS 2

RELEASED: 2016 | PUBLISHER: UBISOFT | DEVELOPER: UBISOFT

4

The first *Watch Dogs* was more overtly cyberpunk than its sequel, but it's also a far inferior game. *Watch Dogs 2* picks up everything it did well, particularly the use of hacking as a primary weapon and a city in which everything can be manipulated, and throws out everything else. While the sequel doesn't have much raw story, it does a great job of making new hero Marcus Holloway feel like part of something important. *Watch Dogs 2* puts you at the bottom of the social ladder, then hands you a hacksaw to bring the system crashing down. Doing so makes for great set-pieces and a genuine feeling of power.



BLADE RUNNER

RELEASED: 1997 | PUBLISHER: VIRGIN | DEVELOPER: WESTWOOD STUDIOS

3

Westwood's *Blade Runner* absolutely nails the style of the movie, recreating its locations with fully animated backgrounds, and offers a score painstakingly recreated by the composer from the original. It's a brand new story in the *Blade Runner* universe, playing out concurrently with Deckard's. The first act especially is a masterful bit of work, plunging you deep into the world and dripping with atmosphere. You get to perform the Voight-Kampff test, face off with replicants who aren't afraid to thrust you into an arcade sequence without warning, and generally live for a while in a more-or-less perfect recreation of LA, 2019.



Discover the truth; you, your mates, and your Johnson.

2 SHADOWRUN: DRAGONFALL

RELEASED: 2014 | PUBLISHER: HAREBRAINED SCHEMES | DEVELOPER: HAREBRAINED SCHEMES

It's amazing that we had to wait so long for either of the two big cyberpunk tabletop RPGs to make their way to PC – if you ignore Microsoft's team-based FPS *Shadowrun*, which everyone really should. Despite both SNES and Mega Drive owners getting *Shadowrun* games in the early '90s, we had to wait until 2013 for Harebrained Schemes' *Shadowrun Returns*. The original campaign, *Dead Man's Switch*, is solid enough. The sequel (originally an expansion pack before thankfully being re-released as a standalone game), is phenomenal.

Shadowrun's take on cyberpunk is a complex one, mixing in magical and fantasy elements, with the players – shadowrunners – as mercenaries in a world gone mad. *Dragonfall* absolutely nails this, essentially giving you a team, a general objective to raise enough money for a big mission, and a city of opportunities to pick and choose from. It's not a complex business simulation or anything like that, but it conveys the vibe of being a shadowrunner far more effectively than a series of mandatory

missions ever could. You spend time with your team and get to know their personalities and problems, help them out, and slowly improve your gear until you're ready to take on literal dragons.

All of this plays out in two basic modes: RPG exploration, and solid tactical combat that makes good use of your team and their abilities. The magical parts of the setting really help with these, allowing the action to go beyond guns.

The third game, *Shadowrun: Hong Kong*, was also an excellent RPG, but it was this sense of actually being in control that made *Dragonfall* stand out, both in its series and the genre in general. It's a structural approach we don't often see, and yet one that doesn't get in the way of a strong main storyline and a satisfying ending. What *Dragonfall* lacks in raw technology, with its relatively simple engine and graphics, it more than makes up for in scope and heart.

It's one of the best RPGs of the last few years, and one of the best cyberpunk games full stop. Harebrained is now part of strategy behemoth Paradox Interactive – here's hoping it's working on something even bigger and better.

CYBERPUNK

The Best of Cyberpunk

1

**THE SOCIETAL CHASMS BETWEEN THE
HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS ARE ONLY WIDENED
BY THE ADDITION OF TECHNOLOGY**



The future's bright. The future's golden. But still pretty depressing.

DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

RELEASED: 2011 | PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX | DEVELOPER: EIDOS MONTREAL

Honestly, the question was never whether *Deus Ex* would end up topping this list, but whether this or the original would take the crown.

The first game is of course a classic, but time hasn't been especially kind to its technology or some of its ideas, and politically it's from a very different era. *Human Revolution* lacks some of its raw scope and imagination, but is a far sleeker experience that builds on what the original does so well, and what other franchises have brought to the immersive sim genre in the

intervening years. Yes, the boss fights suck, and can rightly go and stand in the corner with those copies of *Invisible War* and *Mankind Divided's* garbage ending, but in all other respects, *Human Revolution* still holds up extremely well as a glimpse of a possible future.

It helps that, while the original *Deus Ex* was largely built around conspiracy theories – groups like the Illuminati and so on – *Human Revolution* concentrates on transhumanism and the societal chasms between the haves and

have-nots that are only widened by the addition of technology. As gravelly-voiced, professional not-asker-for-this Adam Jensen, you're in the rare position of being in the middle of the situation, with a body full of fancy toys that isn't exactly yours. You're neither truly with the rich and powerful in their ivory towers, nor down with the gutter-rats, but perfectly placed to either prop up a failing society or help it come crashing down.

This gives *Human Revolution* a resonance that many other supercop fantasies struggle with, in a world perfectly set up to explore technology in both its positive and negative forms. The same science that can replace an arm or eyeball can also be abused, or simply demonised, with just a few flicks of a switch. Fancy cyborg gear can elevate the average person, but also make them subject to its creators in both body and soul. Is it a fair trade? What if the people just seize it?

The sequel, *Mankind Divided*, focuses on the social issues of all this, with questionable success. *Human Revolution* handles it more elegantly by simply presenting the situation, and allowing you, the player, to decide which path is correct. Admittedly, this boils down to pressing a button and watching a video clip, but still. While it lasts, it's a solid shooter, a thought-provoking game, and also it lets you punch people through walls.



I don't know where going on with this. I don't know where, but my orders come from the Director. I don't get it.



He didn't ask for that, either.

AAAAAA

Independent games in a present where cyberpunk is made redundant by reality.

By Porpentine Charity Heartscape

They asked me to write about cyberpunk and discuss some of the little fellows operating in that arena, presumably due to my effete, soft-bellied physiology which hints at a motherly instinct for the deprived. As purge week rolls out, we turn our eye to the people using free range organic human blood in their products, giving you that fair and balanced reporting you crave during Oscar season.

Bonafides: I'm a poor, the official cyberpunk caste. I modify my body as much as the next gal, maybe an Overton window or two more. I made some cyberpunk games including the sequel to *System Shock*. My healthcare is 432Hz – The DEEPEST Healing | Let Go Of All Negative Energy – Healing Meditation Music 432Hz and Trauma Recovery Theta Waves Meditation Music With Binaural Beats Healing Frequency | Good Vibes.

THE LITTLE GUYS

Roguelikes are perfect for cyberpunk because they're balanced by the player's greed. *Invisible Inc* and *868-Hack* are prime examples, where more loot exists than you can possibly fit in your cute little mouth! Entire levels of cookie jars, and you can upgrade your stomach and your wrist size and also put the cookie jar in a choke hold.

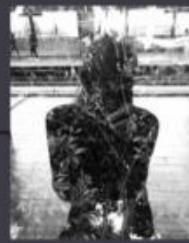
Invisible Inc is tightly designed, but its levels feel mysterious, sprawling, thematic, truly panicky

when you stay too long and cameras and drones are waking up everywhere, heroic when you use every last action point to barely scrape your way to the exit, whereas *868-Hack* is pure microscopic primordial competition, each stage compacted to a single screen, every cookie jar engraved with exactly which cookie is inside them and exactly how many snakes will spring forth if you break it. The player can't make any excuses.

Dystopia is this *Half-Life 2* total conversion mod on Steam that probably doesn't have as many people playing it as it deserves, but it was such a robust approach to team-based shooters! Instead of picking a character, you build your own from a combination of body shapes, weapons, and implants.

My favourite combination was leg boosters + katana + cortex bomb (the cortex being the most cyberpunk part of the brain) to parkour through the level and suicide into a helpless nerd staring at their console, and when someone kills you, hop around frantically and explode all over their delicate defences. It was such a hilariously chaotic way of playing.

And that nerd staring at the console? There's a parallel Tron world where your avatars sling energy balls at each other and fight for control of nodes that let you open doors, activate turrets, etc, back in the real world. So instead of protecting a payload you're protecting a specific human player doing their best Zero Cool impression. I like that winning requires mastery over both worlds.



AUTHOR

Porpentine Charity Heartscape is an acclaimed independent games designer, artist, and writer known for her inventive and subversive Twine projects, including *With Those We Love Alive* and *Eczema Angel Orifice*. Her work has been exhibited at the Whitney Biennial, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, as well as receiving the Prix Net Art Award. We asked her for her thoughts on the world of indie cyberpunk games – this is what she sent us. You can find out more about her at bit.ly/2n5q9CH



CYBERPUNK

Cyberpunk Indies

» The freedom *Dystopia* allows the player remains ambitious and rarely matched.

CLASS WARFARE, DIRECT ACTION

Games are systems of optimisation, much like jobs, where you're just trying to fine-tune the day to day peccadilloes of your drone-cage and the actual story (enslaving and burning the planet) is in the background. So they fit perfectly into this era of atomized, internalised corporate hegemony. Grind F2P, argue with another fleshbot on social media, busy work until you die, people are so fucked they instinctively look for games that therapeutically mimic safely having a stable job.

True kvlt cyberpunk = stealing and manipulating back an iota of the birthright stolen from you by the immortal biz-egregores squatting on the flayed surface of Gaia with their algorithm-driven AI-god infinite warehouse heat stroke hellplexes. Instead, people read cyberpunk as "cool fashion" because ultimately, people just want to look good and fuck. If you're a liberal, you want to look good and be morally absolved and fuck. God forbid I get in the way of that. They'll fuck a hole right through you!

Anyways, read *Sabotage* in the *American Workplace*.

BOTTOM: Early 2000s gaming webcomic caption.



BODY MURDERIFICATION

I made a lot of my cyberpunk games while hormonally modifying my body and it definitely gave a whole "I'm boiling alive" effect to the vibe. *Vesp*, *Sticky Zeitgeist*, *Neon Haze*, *Miniskirt World Network: Business Slut Online*, *Sky in the Room*, *High End Customizable Sauna Experience*, *Cyberqueen* (I don't think this is

cyberpunk it just has the word cyber in it which is good enough). No one got hurt or exploited while making them except me, so they're not real games, just SCP or vapourwave enemas or whatever.

One of my favourites is *Vesp*, a world built around a perpetual plague of insects: epi pens at every corner, pesticide perfume, and a

ENTIRE LEVELS OF COOKIE JARS, AND
YOU CAN UPGRADE YOUR STOMACH



Image credit: Rook, my co-collaborator on Sticky Zeitgeist



Every week the skyscraper mind
algorithmically generates a new dress code:

3.25 inch heels: mandatory
Skirt length may not exceed 12 inches
Fragments of coal scattered across nape of
neck encouraged
Jewelry is allowed in the bathroom, or in pitch
black rooms

FAR LEFT: One of many types of moms you can find in the world.

LEFT: Yeahhhhhh nice.

FAR RIGHT: Trampled to death by hordes of cyberwomen.

RIGHT: 868 Hack – the first game to simulate Emotions.

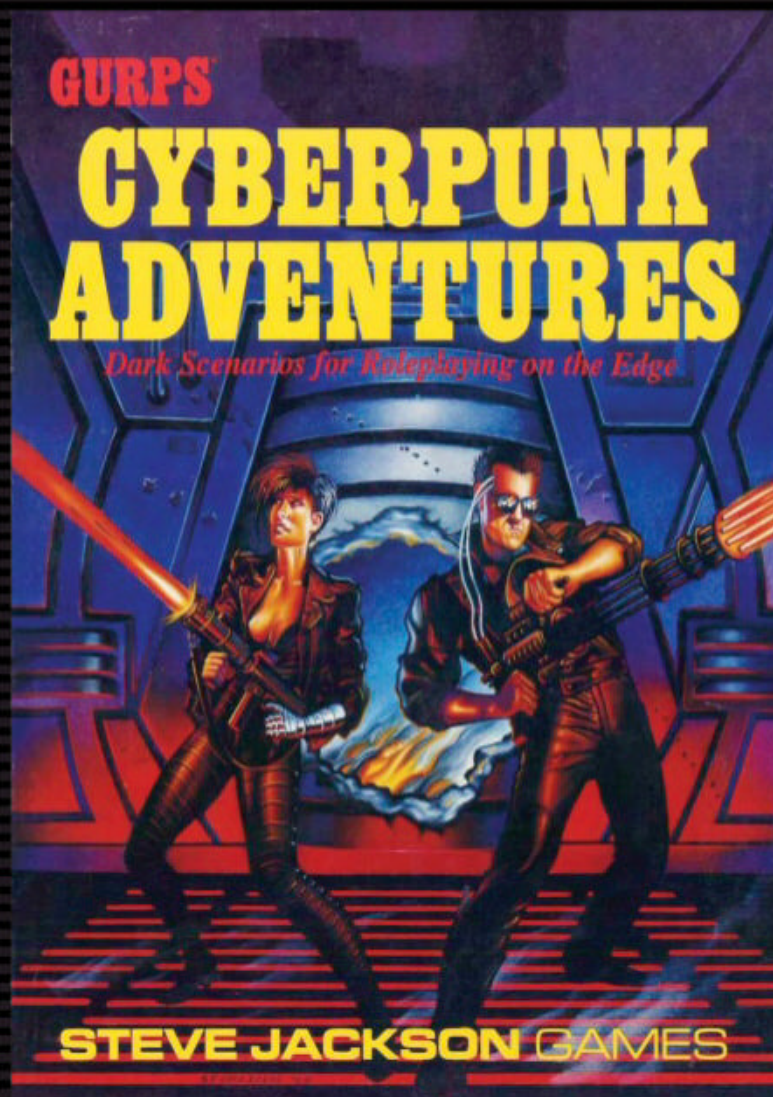


woman who sympathises with insects to a criminal degree. *Sticky Zeitgeist* is global warming creepy pasta cyberpunk for losers set around the 100th iteration of the internet.

I played this old boardgame, *Hacker*, based on when Steve Jackson Games was raided by the Secret Service after making GURPS Cyberpunk, an RPG sourcebook that was apparently “a handbook for computer crime”.

In this “game on a board”, you hack through phones like they did in the old days and try to have the most servers or something. It’s pretty random and unfair (lose an hour’s worth of upgrades!) and I felt bad for even winning, but it has that historicity, which is all most games can ever aspire to.

Everyone at the table had a personal vial of pickle salt divvied from our larder. We were born with hormonal deficits, which we manually supply to stay alive. One of these medications is a diuretic which rapidly depletes sodium from our bodies, hence the salt licks. It’s a great birth defect for deer furries to



get into. Society is so stratified that this harmless act is enough to make us untouchables, we look too much like cool anime mutants and angels and threaten the primacy of the old gods. Cyberpunked again dood.

SCANDAL AND BLOODSHED

Darn! We’re running out of time! One last reader question: How can we as a community move forward after the guy from that one cyberpunk game shaved the word GAY into a dog then shot it with a flare gun on stream*? Surely it doesn’t compromise all the human fuel typing lines of code to launch a living, immersive surrogate world at us, the loyal gamers? We, the gamers, surely deserve our nut? Our share of creation??

But when you really get down to it ultimately the kind of writing anyone is allowed to do on the internet is clickbait masturbation and writing against is the same as writing for and this is the most cyberpunk Christmas of all. Until next time gamers! ■

*Context! A beautiful English countryside on a gamer’s retreat, the King’s Wood, if you will, the earthy, hallowed ancestral memory of hunting blossoming like a hungry flower in the heart of any red-blooded visitor to Albion.

1

MONA

LISA

OVERDRIVE

The concept art that brings to life gaming's dark futures. *By Rick Lane*

Few fictional genres possess such strong stylistic associations as cyberpunk. The word instantly conjures images of cities soaked in neon-lit rain, where glittering glass skyscrapers loom over squalid slums, where the lines between the organic and the synthetic have become blurred beyond recognition, and where virtual

worlds are often just as real and just as dangerous as the physical one.

The strength of cyberpunk's aesthetic makes games which adopt it easy to identify, but it also makes breaking away from that style a challenge. Here, we'd like to celebrate the different shades of cyberpunk gaming has conjured, delving into how these virtual visions of imagined futures reflect the themes their developers wanted to explore.

1 The Matrix, *Shadowrun*'s cyberspace, as depicted in the *Hong Kong* sequel.

2 *Shadowrun*'s concept art gives us a sense not only of what environments look like, but also how the game plays.

SHADOWRUN RETURNS

Shadowrun Returns blends cyberpunk with fantasy to create a world where orcs with prosthetic arms serve you drinks in underground dive taverns, while trenchcoat-wearing elves get into gunfights on the cracked streets of Seattle.

Here, you can see concept art from both the original game and its two expansions/sequels, *Dragonfall* and *Hong Kong*. Compared to *Mankind Divided* and *Observer* (overleaf), *Shadowrun* offers a much broader sense of its own world, depicting how cultures differ and overlap across its various locations.

Much of *Shadowrun*'s concept is closely aligned with how the final game looks. Not only does it define the game's cel-shaded aesthetic, it also shows us the perspective from which the game is played. See if you can spot the katana-wielding orc sneaking through the dockyards in the image below.



1

1 The jigsaw piece-like holographs reflect Lazarski's perception of the world as a puzzle to be solved.

2 The influence of *Blade Runner* is strongly evident throughout.

3 Technology can't hide the decay rife throughout *Observer's* dark, moody apartment block.

OBSERVER

Featuring a sterling performance from the late, great Rutger Hauer, *Observer* is a sci-fi detective horror created by Bloober Team, the developer of *Layers Of Fear*. It sees players investigating a murder at an apartment block, hacking directly into the minds of witnesses and victims to solve the case.

Observer is more directly inspired by *Blade Runner* than any other game mentioned here. As well as featuring one of the movie's actors, *Observer's* crumbling apartment block strongly evokes the tenement Roy Batty chases Rick Deckard through in the film's climax, where the high-tech society hasn't fixed the dripping pipework and damp-ridden plasterboard that the city's lower echelons call home.

Observer paints an aggressive and invasive vision of technology. Its cobalt-blue holographs spread through the apartment block like a virus, creating barriers that inhibit detective Dan Lazarski's progress. Meanwhile, software in the minds Lazarski hacks into construct virtual horrors that stalk him right back.

2



3

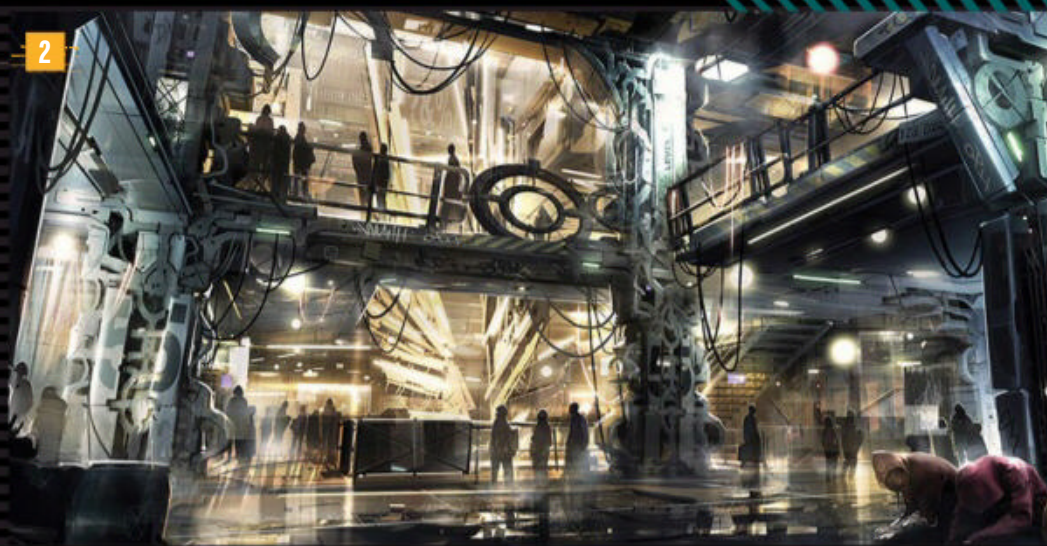




1 The other side of cyberpunk. Sleek lines, bold colours, glass displays.

2 Golem City's use of lighting and wires makes you feel like you're exploring a literal urban jungle.

3 The ominous façade of Golem City.



DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

While it clearly owes a debt to the *Deus Ex* games that preceded it, particularly the sepia streets and skyscrapers of *Human Revolution*, *Mankind Divided* nonetheless takes its cyberpunk aesthetic in some interesting new directions. Set in Prague, it cleverly melds medieval architecture with the gaudy holograms and jagged metallic structures of its imagined future. At launch, *Mankind Divided* stood out particularly for its extreme attention to detail. It's a world in which every desk and alley is cluttered with the detritus of life.

All the art seen here was drawn by Mathieu Latour-Duhaime, a veteran artist currently working at EA Motive. As well as doing general concepts, Duhaime also masterminded *Mankind Divided's* eye-popping Golem City area, a sprawling slum-metropolis that provides a literal vision of an urban jungle. Electrical wires dangle everywhere like rainforest vines, and the yellowish strip lights give a sense of viewing the sun through a thick canopy of foliage.

IT CLEVERLY MELTS MEDIEVAL
ARCHITECTURE WITH HOLOGRAMS
AND JAGGED METALLIC STRUCTURES





Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Tel: 01225 442244 | **Email:** letters@pcgamer.com

www.pcgamer.com

Brand Director Tim Clark

Global Editor-in-Chief Evan Lahti

PC GAMER UK

Editor-in-Chief, UK Phil Savage
Managing Editor Robin Valentine
Online Editor, UK Tom Senior
Section Editor Andy Kelly
News Editor Fraser Brown
Guides Editor Harry Shepherd
Art Editor John Strike
Production Editor Tim Empey

PC GAMER US

Executive Editor Tyler Wilde
Senior Editor Wes Fenlon
Senior Reporter Steven Messner
Staff Writer James Davenport
Staff Writer Chris Livingston
Weekend Editor Jody Macgregor
News Lead Andy Chalk
Hardware Lead Bo Moore
Senior Hardware Editor Jarred Walton
Hardware Staff Writer Joanna Nelius

CONTRIBUTORS

Richard Cobbett, Ian Evenden, Porpentine Charity Heartscape,
Rick Lane, Jody Macgregor, Alex Spencer

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION

Photographer Olly Curtis
Spy Illustrations David Lyttleton

DIGITAL PRODUCTION

Group Production Editor Steve Wright
Editorial Operations Assistant Nick Lee

PRODUCTION

Head of Production US & UK Mark Constance
Production Project Manager Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller Jason Hudson
Production Manager Fran Twentyman

ADVERTISING

Commercial Director Clare Dove
Advertising Director Tom Parkinson
Account Director Jeff Jones
Account Manager Kevin Stoddart

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING

Head of Print Licensing Rachel Shaw

SUBSCRIPTIONS & CIRCULATION

Head of subscriptions Sharon Todd
Head of Newstrade Tim Mathers

SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Chief Content Officer Aaron Asadi
Commercial Finance Director Dan Jotcham
Head of Art & Design Rodney Dive
Senior Art Editor, Games Warren Brown

SUBSCRIPTIONS Email: contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk | **UK orderline:** 0344 848 2852 | **International orderline:** +44 (0)344 848 2852 | www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk

DISTRIBUTED BY Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU | **Tel:** 0203 787 9001 | www.marketforce.co.uk

LICENSING Email: licensing@futurenet.com

ISSN: 1351-3540

All contents © 2019 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.



PC GAMER
PRESENTS

CYBERPUNK

Issue 337
December 2019